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DUTY AND ADVANTAGE

O F

RELIGIOUS SOCIETIES,

PROVEN FROM

SCRIPTURE AND REASON:

With proper DIRECTIONS to all who either are or
may be engaged in such SOCIETIES.

IN TWO LETTERS;

One from the Reverend Mr. JOHN WILLISON, Mi-
nister of the Gospel at DUNDEE, and

The other from the Reverend Mr. JOHN BONAR, Mi-
nister of the Gospel at TORPHICHEN;

Both directed to a private Society in EDINBURGH,
Anno 1740.

To which is subjoined,

An Inquiry into the Nature, Obligation, and Advan-
tages of RELIGIOUS FELLOWSHIP: Together
with an Attempt to direct in the proper Exercise
of it.

First published in the Year 1746, by Mr. JOHN WARREN,
then Minister of the Gospel in CAMPSIE.

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DUTY AND ADVANTAGE, &c.

DUNDEE, 24th March, 1740.

My dearly beloved young Gentlemen,

I RECEIVED your most agreeable letter, with which I was much refreshed. And though I know you not by face, yet seeing you are pleased to acquaint me of your joining together in a religious society for such excellent purposes as you mention in your letter, and to desire my prayers, advice, and assistance for your encouragement in your resolutions; expressing also your hopes that what I write to you may be useful, not only to your lately erected society, but to others also in the place: I cannot refuse to comply with your earnest requests. I have endeavoured to encourage such societies in this country, and have seen the benefit thereof to religion: and now I rejoice to hear of the increase of such meetings in and about Edinburgh our metropolis, and especially among college students; which revives our hopes concerning the church, and the promoting of Christianity in the rising generation. Well then, at your desire, looking to heaven for the blessing, I shall drop some things for your encouragement and assistance in your undertaking.

Two things I purpose to insist on in this missive:

1mo, To shew the necessity and usefulness of such societies.---

2do, To offer some advices for the more successful management of them.

As to the first; religious society or Christian fellowship, which I recommend, it lies in a mutual serviceableness of Christians to one another in spiritual things, by communicating their gifts and graces to each other, for mutual benefit and edification. This fellowship

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I look upon as an excellent mean of divine institution for promoting true piety and godliness in the land, and for preserving it in corners where it is ready to decay. Observe how warmly the Spirit of God doth recommend it to us, Eccl. iv. 9. *Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour.* Ver. 10. *For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but wo to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.* Ver. 11. *Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: But how can one be warm alone?* Ver. 12. *And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.* In like manner he recommends this religious fellowship, Prov. xxvii. 17. *Iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.* ---As this fellowship was anciently recommended, so we find it anciently practised by the fearers of God, Mal. iii. 16. *Then they that feared the Lord, spake often one to another, and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord and thought upon his name.* There we see, the fearers of the Lord in those days did not live like strangers, but spoke often together; they often met to converse together, not about secular matters, but about things tending to the honour of that God whom they feared and served: for God is so well pleased with their converse, that he observes and records it. Again, observe the time of their religious converse, pointed at by the word *then*; which may teach us how much this converse is the duty of our day, if we consider the preceding part of Malachi's prophecy. The time of their conferring together was, when sad corruptions abounded both among the priests and the people: it was then, when the covenant of Levi was corrupted, and many were made to stumble at the law; then, when Judah dealt treacherously with God, slighted his ordinances, and offered the blind and lame to him in sacrifice; then, when religion was openly reproached and contemned,

and



and terrible judgments were threatened against the whole land; then it was that the fearers of the Lord often met and consulted together, for strengthening one another in the service of God, for arming themselves against the common contagion, and securing themselves from the common dangers.

The late famous Doctor Calamy, in a sermon which he preached and published on this text, London, April 23d, 1714, doth prove the warrantableness of fellowship-meetings, and presses them warmly with many arguments: and, though we had not another text for them in all the Bible, this one in Malachi is sufficient to warrant them. This text is a clear evidence to me, that religious associations of such as fear God are most acceptable to God, and never more seasonable than when true piety runs low, and times are perilous. And also this text doth warrant me to conclude, that in our age and time, when infidelity and immorality do abound, and the Lord's judgments are in the earth, that it is the duty of Christians to join together in private meetings, for keeping up the credit of religion now when it is run down and scoffed at; and also for fasting, humbling, and afflicting our souls for the sins of the places where we dwell, and for averting wrath from them, and for pleading with the Lord to appear for his own interest and cause.

For these very purposes we find Ezra and his men meeting together for fasting and prayer, Ezra viii. 23. In like manner did queen Esther with her maidens join together in fasting and prayer for averting threatened ruin, Esther iv. 16. This also was the practice of the Lord's people during their captivity at Babylon, Psal. cxxxvii. 1. They went in companies, and sat down by the rivers of Babylon, where they *wept, and remembered Zion*, both in their prayers to God, and converse one with another. This religious converse among the people of God, for knowing his mind and their duty in particular cases, we find expressly commanded, Jer. xxiii. 35. *Thus shall ye say every one to his*

his neighbour, and every one to his brother, What hath the Lord answered? and what hath the Lord spoken? Likewise this religious converse is prophesied of, as that which would much abound in gospel-times, Zech. viii. 21, 23. The inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, Let us go speedily to pray before the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts: I will go also. They shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you; for we have heard that God is with you. Then they would flock together, invite and excite one another to seek the Lord. We see holy David was much delighted and taken up with this religious fellowship, Psal. cxix. 63. I am a companion of all them that fear thee, and of them that keep thy precepts. How chearfully doth he invite all such to come and join with him in this holy fellowship! Psal. lxvi. 16. Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul.

According to the foresaid ancient prophecies, and the practice of the Old Testament saints, we read of sweet fellowship meetings among saints in the New Testament. The glorious King of saints had many such private meetings with his disciples for religious exercises in the days of his flesh, which are recorded for our imitation, Matth. xiii. 36, 51.---xvii. 12.---xx. 17.---xxiv. 3. Mark iv. 34.---vi. 30, 31.---viii. 27. Luke ix. 18.---xi. 1. John xiv. 1, 2, &c. And after his resurrection we read of many fellowship-meetings which Christ had with his disciples in private, as that one which he had with the two disciples that were going to Emmaus. O how long and how sweetly did he converse with them about spiritual things! Luke xxiv. 15, &c. And again, that same evening, he had another pleasant meeting in private with the eleven disciples in Jerusalem, and others met with them, Luke xxiv. 33, 36. It was on the evening of the first day of the week, that the disciples met with shut doors for private edification, and strengthening one another in that dark time: then it was that Christ was pleased

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pleased to come to their meeting, and hold sweet fellowship with them. This John also relates, John xx. 19, &c. Also we read of another such private meeting they had eight days after, when Thomas was with them, which our blessed Lord did likewise join, to their great comfort and edification, John xx. 26, &c. Afterwards he had another blessed fellowship-meeting with them at the sea of Tiberias, John xxi. 14, 15, &c. And, after that, another sweet meeting he had with them at Bethany, when he blessed them, and ascended from them, Luke xxiv. 50, &c.

And, according to our Lord's example while on earth, we find after his ascension that this religious fellowship in private was stedfastly kept up and maintained by all the primitive Christians, as it is recorded, Acts ii. 42, 46. Yea, then they reckoned this Christian fellowship so essential to their religion, that they made the communion of saints an article of their creed; so that, in these early times, they were not looked upon as Christians, who did not maintain and cleave to this fellowship, and take pleasure in the converse and society of Christians. No sooner was Paul converted, and come to Jerusalem, but he essayed to join the meetings of the disciples there, Acts ix. 26. These praying societies were then very common and frequent at Jerusalem and other places, as appears from many instances recorded in the book of the Acts. It is said, Acts i. 14 *These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, &c.* Yea, so familiar and common were these meetings in those early days, that Peter and John went straight to them, when they were dismissed from the council where they had been examined and threatened, Acts iv. 23. *And being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them.* Again, we find such a religious society met and praying in the house of Mary (as many others were doing at that time for Peter in prison under sentence of death) to which meeting Peter came straight

straight when he was delivered, and declared what God had done for him, and desired them to go and tell the news to other societies, Acts xii. 5, 12, 17. Likewise we find a religious company of Cornelius's friends gathered together in his house, when God sent Peter to preach to them, Acts x. 27. Also we read of a company of women resorting together for prayer at a place by a river side at Philippi, to whom Paul preached, Acts xvi. 13. And these praying societies were so notour thro' all the Christian churches in Paul's time, that, when he writes to the saints in Rome, his request is for their united prayers to God for him, Rom. xv. 30. *I beseech you, that ye strive together in your prayers to God for me.* And such joint social prayers are so pleasant and acceptable to God, that our Lord makes a gracious promise for their encouragement, Matth. xviii. 19, 20. *If two of you shall agree on earth, as touching any thing they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.* Many times have God's people in praying societies had these promises made good to them: of which the society in the house of Mary had the sweet experience; for the Lord sent the answer of their prayers to the door before they parted, Acts xii. 13. In like manner have other praying societies had remarkable returns of prayer from a prayer-hearing God. It was this that made our godly ancestors cleave to their meetings in this land in times of hottest persecution, when our rulers raged, and fought to ruin all who haunted them; yet they risked their all in this world, to enjoy the sweetness and benefit of Christian fellowship in private meetings. And how shameful a thing must it be for us their posterity to be unwilling to attend such religious meetings, when we have nothing to fear by it save a little reproach from scoffers at piety.

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I intend not to favour their opinion, who would have these praying meetings restricted to times of trouble and persecution only. No; such societies, well regulated, are most useful and beneficial at all times and seasons. And it is always observed, as worthy Mr. Boston says, in parishes where the gospel begins to thrive, that these meetings are set up as naturally as birds draw together in the spring. I must own, that I take it as a promising token to the rising generation, that so many of the hearts of young ones and others, especially students, are inclined to become members of fellowship-meetings; in order to communicate Christian knowledge and experience, and to promote the edification of one another. However much these duties are neglected, I am sure they are plainly enjoined in the scriptures upon all Christians. Even private Christians are bound to *teach and admonish one another*, Col. iii. 16. Rom. xv. 14. to *exhort one another daily*, Heb. iii. 13. to *confess their sins to one another*, and *pray for one another*, James v. 17. to *strengthen, comfort and edify one another*, 1 Theff. v. 11, 14. Now, how can these relative duties be mutually performed by Christians, if they continue strangers and keep at a distance from one another? How can they *teach, admonish, exhort, excite, support, comfort, strengthen and edify one another*, unless they have private meetings together for these ends? To deny these meetings, were to forbid all these Christian duties which God hath commanded.---But it is very observable, that the Spirit of God doth expressly connect these duties and private meetings together, Heb. x. 24, 25. *And let us consider one another, to provoke unto love and good works: Not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: And so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.* That the apostle points at the private assemblies or meetings of Christians, is evident from these mutual Christian offices and duties which he presses upon all private Christians, and which must

be performed by them, not in public, but in private meetings. In public church-meetings private persons have not access to teach, excite, and exhort others, and in these women are not allowed to speak; and yet the foresaid duties are laid upon all Christians whatsoever, which necessarily infers their private meetings

If it should be objected, that these relative duties may be performed by Christians in families; I answer, No doubt they may in a good measure, where families are little churches: but oh how few of these are to be found! In many families there may be but one serious Christian in each of them. Now, can this their situation loose them from the command of holding private communion with other Christians, either to edify them, or to be edified by them? By no means. And therefore persons of diverse families must have occasions of meeting together, that they may be capable of obeying the commands of comforting and edifying one another, 1 Thess v. 11.

Moreover, there is another strong scripture argument for these meetings: the apostle tells us, 1 Cor. xii. that God hath dispensed a variety of gifts among Christians, and in different measures, that one may be helpful to another: this also is evident from daily observation. To one is given quickness of wit and parts, to another is given solidity of judgment and prudence; to one a strong memory, to another a ready expression and utterance; one is open and zealous, another is more wary and cautious; one is strong in gifts, another is but weak; one is more knowing, another is more warm; one is more dejected, another is more cheerful. Now, why hath God given such a great diversity of gifts? but for mutual usefulness, that the knowing and judicious may impart light to these who are more lively and active, and that the warm and zealous may impart of their heat to these who are more knowing and prudent? So that *the head cannot say to the feet, nor the eye to the hand, I have no need of thee,*

thee, 1 Cor. xii. 21. By which distribution the wisdom of God is gloriously displayed. Now, it is certain he doth not give Christians these various talents to be wrapt up in a napkin, but to be improven for the benefit of others, as they will be answerable to him; and therefore with the talents he gives that injunction, Luke xix. 13. *Occupy till I come*. And he condemneth the man that hid his talent in the earth.

Again, let every Christian observe that express command, 1 Pet. iv. 10. *As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God*. For, saith Paul, the gifts, or manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal, 1 Cor. xii. 7. Now, how can private Christians obey this command of ministering their gifts one to another, without meeting together for that end?

Likewise, these meetings are necessary to distinguish and separate Christians from the rest of the world, as they are required to be. Christians are chosen out of the world, and a society by themselves; and, though they be situated in the midst of others, they are a *people dwelling alone, and not reckoned among the nations*. The apostle calls them, 1 Pet. ii. 9. *a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a peculiar people*; and consequently they ought to have a peculiar fellowship one with another, as being fellow-members of that one body whereof Christ is the head. Now, it is becoming these members to shew a peculiar sympathy with and concern for each other in distress, and to be peculiarly helpful in relieving one another, and in quickening and promoting one another's graces; which necessarily requires private meetings.

Again, these religious societies are useful to strengthen and fortify weak Christians against the assaults and temptations of their spiritual enemies: As houses built together in cities hold better out against storms, though their walls be weaker, than these which stand separately in the open fields; because,

being joined together, they help to support one another: so many poor, weak, dejected souls, by being joined in fellowship-meetings, have been greatly supported and relieved by the sympathy and counsels, experiences and prayers of these in society with them. By Christian society many a temptation hath been defeated, many a sin prevented, and many a wavering soul fortified. How boldly did Peter confess Christ in the company of the apostles? but shamefully denied him when separated from them. How dreadfully did unbelief prevail in Thomas, when absent from the meeting of the disciples? but his faith became victorious when in society with them. This absence of Thomas, with the dismal effect of it, is recorded no doubt to serve as a warning to all to beware of neglecting such meetings. These who once frequented, and now have withdrawn fellowship-meetings, can tell, if they would be ingenuous, whether their souls thrived best when in them, or when separate from them; nay, the worst may be feared of them. - Many judicious Christians can tell from their sweet experience, that they have found the advantage of these meetings for quickening their graces, warming their hearts, and kindling the fire of love to Christ. It was after religious conference, that the two disciples said, *Did not our hearts burn within us?* As one live coal kindles two cold ones, so one warm lively Christian, by his converse and prayers, is apt to set several cold hearts a glowing about Christ and spiritual things.

Lastly, This Christian fellowship here below, is necessary to fit us for the eternal communion of saints in heaven. If we have no pleasure in fellowship with them here, how shall we be fit to live for ever in the closest communion with them in the regions above, adoring and serving the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost? All Christians ought to chuse and delight in that society and business now, in which they are to join and be employed through the ages of eternity. As these who design to travel to a far country, chuse to do it in company;

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company; so Christians, travelling to the New-Jerusalem, should go in troops, as they did of old to the solemn feasts. We see soldiers, who go to war, study to keep close together, and to animate one another: and so ought all Christ's soldiers to do, if they would manage their spiritual warfare with success. We see wicked and profane men, comedians, drunkards, thieves and robbers, join in clubs and societies to serve the Devil; and should not the servants of Christ act in society to serve and advance the interest of the best of masters? Do wicked men meet to excite one another's corruptions, and embolden one another in sinful courses? Let Christians then meet to quicken one another's graces, and to instruct and encourage one another in the way to heaven.

And now, having briefly, though, I trust, with some clearness of evidence, established fellowship-meetings upon a scripture foundation, and demonstrated their usefulness to all Christians; I hope, dearly beloved, these lines may serve, through the divine blessing, to animate and encourage your several members to attend the diets of your meeting, and others also to imitate your example. Wherefore I proceed to the second head.

II. I propose to offer some advices for the more successful management of such religious societies. And,

1. Dear brethren, if you would be useful and shining members of such societies, let me intreat you to press for and make progress in humility and self-denial, and study much the meaning and importance of that golden precept, Phil. ii. 3. *Let nothing be done through strife, or vain-glory, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.* This lowliness of mind would sweetly improve your tempers, and mightily adapt and fit them for society: it would dispose you to bear with, and put respect and honour upon, your fellow-members; and keep you from despising, censuring, or quarrelling with them for every mistake or

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or failing. And though you may see weaknesſes in ſome as to gifts or prudence, yet this lowly diſpoſition will cauſe you eſteem and honour them for their warm affections, or what grace may be in them.

2 Be at great pains, through grace to ſtudy the right government and taming of the tongue, which is indeed an *unruly member, and full of deadly poiſon*, and very frequently is the occaſion of much miſchief and diſcord in ſocieties. Nay, I may ſay, if the tongue be not tamed and brought under government, all religion and religious fellowſhip is in vain; according to that word in James i. 26. Now, if the tongue be rightly governed, you will avoid cenſoriousneſs and raſh judging of other men, or aggravating their faults beyond bounds. Alſo, you will be cautious of ſpeaking againſt others behind their backs, or hearkening to thoſe who incline to do it; but, if you know any thing againſt your neighbour, you will rather tell it to himſelf in a friendly manner, that he may be bettered by your ſpeaking. Ah! it is known by ſad experience, that cenſorious perſons and backbiters have been the great dividers and breakers of fellowſhip-meetings.

3. Carry a ſincere love and regard to all true Chriſtians. Love them not becauſe of their likeneneſs to you, but becauſe of their likeneneſs to God, and his image which you ſee in them: for, if you love them mainly becauſe of their exact agreement with you, it is rather ſectarian or party love, than true Chriſtian love. This true love will incline you to a patient bearing with godly perſons, and a forbearing of them in ſome leſſer things wherein they may differ from you. There are ſome miſtakes, both in opinion and practice, that eminent Chriſtians of different converſe and education will labour under, poſſibly all their days, becauſe they *know but in part*. If by meek and gentle dealing you can convince them, it is well; but if not, you are to fall in with God's direction by the apoſtle Paul, who was as zealous againſt ſin and error

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as any in our day, Eph. iv. 2, 3. *With all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.* In the apostle's time, there were great differences about the necessity of circumcision and other ceremonial practices, and some were very zealous both for and against them; but to keep them from carrying matters to too great heights, and from laying too much stress upon their party opinions, and being of this and the other denomination of Christians, he directs them not to judge of mens Christianity by these rules, but only by the rule of the new creature, or the evidences of a saving change wrought in them, as being the only thing that rendered them acceptable to God. For, saith he, *neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature: And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them,* Gal. vi. 15, 16.

4. Rejoice in the gifts and graces of others, and be ready without envy or detraction to own and value them, giving God the praise for them. Yea, prize them when you find them in men unlearned, or of mean rank in the world: do not despise sincere Christians because of their meanness, or plainness of speech; for among such there is sometimes found more knowledge of the scripture, skill in settling distressed consciences, acquaintance with experimental religion, and godly wisdom in observing providence, yea, more faith, submission to the will of God, contentment, heavenly-mindedness, fervency of spirit, and pithy expressions in prayer, than could be expected from such plain persons; so that these of better education and more eloquence may learn many things from them, if they would humble themselves to converse with them. How much of that humble candour and ingenuity did shine forth in that eminent young preacher Apollos! Acts xviii. 24, 25, 26. Though he was an eloquent person, and mighty in the scriptures, yet he candidly owned and honoured the gifts and graces of God in a plain

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plain tradesman and his wife, Aquila and Priscilla, and was willing to learn Christian divinity from them; and by their converse he actually got further insight into the gospel-doctrines and way of salvation.

5. Study a prudent, smooth, affable, and condescending disposition and carriage towards these you converse with, and particularly to these that may be your inferiors in gifts or stations, and even to these who may be strangers to religion, that you may gain them to a better liking of the ways of God. These Christians, who have an alluring facility and kindliness in their tempers, may be very beneficial to these about them, and thereby engage strangers and young beginners to relish true godliness: wherefore we find such amiable tempers and dispositions of spirit much recommended to us by the Spirit of God in many texts, as in these wherein he enjoins us to *put away wrath, bitterness, and evil-speaking; and to be kind and tender hearted one to another; to put on bowels of mercy, kindness, and humbleness of mind; to be compassionate, gentle, courteous, shewing meekness to all men; to be kindly affectionated one to another; not to mind high things, but condescend to men of low estate: for all which, see Eph. iv. 31, 32. Col. iii. 12. Tit. iii. 2. 1 Pet. iii. 8. Rom. xii. 10, 16.* These lovely scripture qualities would nobly fit men to be members of societies. As rough unhewn stones cannot fitly join together in one building, so neither can rugged, sour or fierce tempers be agreeable members of society. There are some in meetings who may have the root of the matter in them, but their rough and fiery dispositions, or their rash and imprudent conduct, do scare many serious people from coming into societies where they are; and so, by their unpolished tempers, or imprudence, they greatly hinder the edification of others.

6. As you ought to warn, admonish, and reprove one another in a kind and Christian manner when there is need for it: so you must be ready to forgive

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one another, and come over injuries that are done to you: for, saith the apostle, *If any man have a quarrel against any, even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye*, Col. iii. 13. Humility, meekness, and readiness to forgive injuries, are Christian and Christ-like tempers. The meek and lowly Christian is very much disposed to do good, and suffer evil: but the proud and haughty man is apt to give affronts, but will receive none. The humble man, that is acquainted with his own heart, will bear with many mistakes and failings in others, knowing that he himself is yet in the body, and liable to the same and worse evils if but left one minute to himself. Keep in mind that word of the apostle, 1 Pet. iv. 8. *Above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover a multitude of sins.*

7. Do not slight or discourage weak beginners, but sympathize and deal tenderly with them: for you are commanded to *strengthen the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees; to condescend to men of low estate; to comfort the feeble-minded, and support the weak*, Isa. xxxv. 3. Rom. xii. 16. 2 Thess. v. 14. There are some hover in the porch to Christian fellowship, and would fain come in to associate with the disciples; but bashfulness, or a sense of weakness or unworthiness, pulls them back: perhaps they can speak but little of Christ, yet their hearts glow with love to him, and they desire to listen and hear news about him, and to be introduced to his acquaintance. These you ought to open the door to, and encourage to come in, and share of the entertainments of the King's chambers. Let no soul be scarred by unkindly treatment from Christ's door, for who knows if ever they come forward again? It becomes Christ's disciples to copy after their Master's pattern, who would *not quench a smoking flax*, but rather blow it up to a flame; and who tenderly carries the lambs that cannot go, and sets an open door before them who have but a little strength, Isa. xl. 11. Rev. iii. 8. He kindly noticed

an Abijah of Jeroboam's family, when there was *some good thing found in him towards the Lord God of Israel*, 1 Kings xiv. 13. the rear or the stragglers of Christ's army are not to be neglected or despised. I have observed some that knew but little of Christ and spiritual things, who, by hearing others talk of them, have in a short time made great progress in knowledge and in love also: thus was it with the daughters of Jerusalem, who got their hearts warmed by hearing the spouse speak of Christ's excellencies; *O whither is thy beloved gone, say they, that we may go and seek him with thee?* Cant. vi. 1. So the people of Samaria were drawn out to meet with Christ, by hearing the woman commending him, John iv. 29. And so were both Andrew and Nathanael drawn to Christ, John i. 40, 45, &c.

8. Chuse right and proper subjects for conference in your meetings; not divisive questions for things controverted amongst the godly, but such as they are agreed in, namely, the weighty matters of religion, that concern the vitals of Christianity; such as, the misery of our fallen state, the corruption of our nature, the bitterness of sin, the plagues of our hearts, the devices of Satan, the wisdom and love of God in our redemption, the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace; Christ's love in undertaking for us, his incarnation, his two natures, and three offices, his sufferings and death, his resurrection, ascension, intercession, and return; the holy Spirit's work in applying Christ's purchase; the nature, necessity, and marks of the new birth, and of our justification by the righteousness of Christ; of faith in him, and repentance unto life; of sanctification, mortification, humility, self-denial, love, hope, communion with God, the life of faith and new obedience, believers privileges, the precious promises, the outward means of grace, &c.---Or, in order to increase Christian knowledge, let the questions of the Shorter Catechism, as they lie in order, be the subject of your discourse: or let any

case

case of conscience be proposed for the subject of it, or any practical question founded upon a scripture-text; and of these your reading in the Bible will afford you the greatest plenty and variety, never to be exhausted. And, that you may be the more encouraged to read the scriptures, and directed to raise edifying questions from what you read; I shall write down a few texts, with questions from them, for your imitation.

From Acts ii. 37. Question, When may the heart be said to be pricked and savingly convinced of sin?

John xvi. 8. Q What is the difference between the convictions of natural men, and these of true penitents?

Isa. xxvi. 18. Q. 1. Whence is it that convictions prove abortive? Q. 2. How to prevent this evil?

1 Thess v. 19. Q. How are persons guilty of quenching the Spirit?

Luke xiii. 3. Q. What are the marks of repentance unto life?

Matth. v. 4. Q. What are the marks of right mourning for sin?

Psal xcvi. 10. Q. What are the signs of true hatred of sin?

Ezek. xxxvi. 26. Q. What are the evidences of a heart changed from stone to flesh?

Psal. li. 17. Q. What is the broken heart that is so acceptable to God?

Tit. i. 1. Q. What are the characters of the faith of God's elect?

John iii. 3. Q. What are the marks of the new birth?

Matth. xviii. 3. Q. Who are these converts that are become as little children?

Eph. ii. 1. Q. What are the signs of a spiritual resurrection?

Matth. v. 6. Q. Who are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness?

Psal. ix. 18. Q. Who are the poor and needy ones, whom God will not forget?

The Duty and Advantage

2 Cor. v. 17. Q. What are the marks of a new creature?

Matth. vii. 24. Q. Who are they that build on a rock?

Matth. vii. 26. Q. Who are they that build on the sand?

Isa. xxviii. 17. Q. What are the lying refuges which many deceive themselves with?

Heb. vi. 18. Q. Who are these that have truly fled for refuge to Christ?

Rom. x. 3. Q. Who are these that go about to establish their own righteousness?

Matth. v. 16. Q. Wherein our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees?

Phil. iii. 3. Q. 1. Who are these that worship God in the spirit? Q. 2. Who are they that rejoice in Christ Jesus? Q. 3. Who are they that have no confidence in themselves?

Luke i. 53. Q. 1. Who are the hungry whom God fills with good things? Q. 2. Who are the rich he sends empty away?

Isa. lvi. 6. Q. What are the characters of these that have taken hold of God's covenant?

2 Chron. xxx. 8. Q. Who are they that have truly yielded themselves to the Lord?

Phil. ii. 13. Q. How may we know if the will be renewed by the Spirit of God?

Matth. v. 47. Q. Wherein must we exceed the ordinary sort of professors of religion?

Rom. vii. 24. Q. Who are the true wrestlers against the body of death, or indwelling sin?

Gal. v. 17. Q. What is the difference betwixt a renewed and unrenewed man's struggling against sin?

Rom. viii. 7. Q. Who are the carnally-minded, and who the spiritually minded?

Phil. iii. 9. Q. What are the marks of these who are found in Christ, and clothed with his righteousness?

John xv. 5. Q. What are the evidences of a vital union with Christ?

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2 Cor. ix. 15. Q. Who are these that are truly thankful for a crucified Jesus?

Zech. xii. 10. Q. Who are they that look in a right manner to a pierced Saviour?

John xvii. 3. Q. What are the marks of a saving knowledge of God and his Son Jesus Christ?

Gal. ii. 20. Q. 1. What is it to live by faith upon the Son of God? Q. 2. How to live by faith on him in great trials? Q. 3. How to attain the assurance of Christ's love to us?

Matth. vii. 7. Q. How to know if the fruit we bring forth be good or bad?

Matth. v. 16. Q. When our light may be said to shine before men, to the praise and glory of God?

John xii. 21. Q. What are the marks of a saving sight of Christ in ordinances?

Psal lxxxiv. 10. Q. Why believers do so highly esteem a day in God's courts?

1 Pet. ii. 7. Q. 1. What is it in Christ that is so precious to believers? Q. 2. How may we know if he be truly precious to us?

Rev. ii. 4. Q. 1. When our love may be said to be decaying? Q. 2. How to cure this decay?

2 Pet. iii. 18. Q. 1. What are the best means of growing in grace? Q. 2. What are the marks of a growing Christian?

James i. 6. Q. What is it to pray in faith?

Jude, ver. 20. Q. 1. What is it to build up ourselves in our most holy faith? Q. 2. What is it to pray in the Holy Ghost?

Jude, ver. 21. Q. By what means shall we keep ourselves in the love of God?

Rom. viii. 16. Q. How doth the Spirit witness in us that we are God's children?

Rom. viii. 26. Q. How doth the Spirit help our infirmities in prayer?

Eph. iv. 30. Q. What is the Spirit's sealing work in believers?

Hof. vi. 4. Q. 1. What is the cause of the evanishing

ing of our good frames? Q. 2. How to prevent our losing them?

Pfal. xviii. 21. Q. Who may say they have not wickedly departed from their God?

Pfal. xviii. 23. Q. 1. How may we know our predominant sin? Q. 2. How shall we conquer it?

Rev. iii. 2. Q. 1. What are the symptoms of grace in decay? Q. 2. What are the causes of it? Q. 3. What are the means of reviving it?

Job xxiii. 3, 8. Q. What course shall they take who have been long in darkness, and cannot find God in duties or ordinances?

Job xxiii. 4. Q. What are the best arguments to fill our mouths with in prayer?

1 Pet. v. 5. Q. Who are these Christians that may be said to be clothed with humility?

2 Cor. xii. 7. Q. How shall we prevent spiritual pride, and being lifted up with our attainments?

Pfal. xvii. 5. Q. How shall we be kept from backslidings after solemn engagements?

Pfal. xxx. 6. Q. How to prevent falling into security after God's kind dealings?

Gal. vi. 16. Q. How should we walk so as to maintain peace with God and conscience?

Pfal. lxxxv. 8. Q. How may we distinguish between a true and false peace of conscience?

Pfal. cxix. 19. Q. What is the character of one that may say, I am a stranger in the earth?

Deut. xvii. 19. Q. How shall we read the word with spiritual advantage?

Heb. iv. 2. Q. 1. How shall we hear the word preached, so as to profit by it? Q. 2. What is it to mix faith with the hearing of the word?

Matth. vi. 6. Q. How shall we manage secret prayer aright?

2 Chron. xxx. 19. Q. What preparation of heart is necessary for solemn ordinances?

1 Cor. xi. 24. Q. What kind of remembrance ought we to keep up of the death of our Redeemer?

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Heb. xi. 28. Q. How is faith to be exercised in communicating?

Eph. vi. 24. Q. What are the characters of these who love our Lord Jesus in sincerity?

1 John ii. 15. Q. What is that love of the world, that is inconsistent with the love of God?

1 John iii. 14. Q. What are the marks of true love to the brethren?

Matth. v. 44. Q. When is our love to enemies of the right sort?

Matth. vi. 14. Q. How may we get our hearts brought to a forgiving disposition?

Lev. xix. 17. Q. What is the right way of reproving our brother?

Eph. v. 7. Q. How may we become partakers of other mens sin?

Heb. xii. 10. Q. When is affliction for our profit?

Phil. i. 27. Q. When is our conversation as becometh the gospel of Christ?

Gal. vi. 9. Q. How may we prevent our wearying in well-doing?

1 Cor. x. 31. Q. How shall we manage our natural and civil actions to the glory of God?

Rom. x. 1. Q. What means may we use for the conversion of others?

Matth. xxv. 6. Q. How should we meet and entertain Christ, when coming by his Spirit to the sinful land?

2 Tim. iv. 8. Q. How shall we attain to a real love of Christ's appearing?

These texts and questions I have set down only as a swatch of many, which you may find out by searching of the scriptures, and acquaintance with your own hearts and spiritual conditions. As it may be useful and edifying for Christians at times to communicate their experiences, exercises, trials and outgates one to another in a private manner; so it may be useful to themselves and the whole society to form and propose

pose questions concerning such cases *in thesi*, that by hearing the mind of others, and especially these of greater experience about them, the persons in such cases, by the blessing of God, may receive suitable counsel or support, consolation or establishment.

Wherefore, dearly beloved, besides prayer, praises, and reading the scriptures in your society, I humbly recommend your discoursing of the above, and such like edifying questions as tend to promote Christian knowledge, the power and life of religion, gospel-holiness, humility, charity, and tender walking with God. But guard against controversies about public matters, and curious, vain, or unprofitable questions, which may bring in doubtful disputations, tending to distract the minds of members, stumble the weak, and rend the society. The subtle enemy of souls, when he cannot hinder religious societies altogether studies to bring in debates that may draw off their minds from the main design of Christianity, and eat out the life and vitals of religion. If men will needs spend time in discoursing about religion, the Devil will try to lead them to such subjects of conference as are little to edification, that greater matters may be thrust out. We see the apostle warns against this discourse, calling it *vain jangling, and doting on questions which engender strife, rather than godly edifying*, 1 Tim. i. 4, &c. Tit. iii. 9. And among these we may justly reckon the questions which some start about their respective opinions, parties, or preachers; or about things which contribute little to make the meeting more wise, more humble, more holy, or more heavenly minded. O that religious societies could say with the apostle, *We are not ignorant of Satan's devices*.

Lastly, My dear friends, let me beseech you to persevere, and not weary in well doing, nor forsake the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is. Alas! I have known it to be the manner of not a few, though I believe (whatever be their pretences for it) they have gained nothing by it to their souls,

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souls, but harm. Nay, I have observed, to my grief,
 many of them turn remiss and carnal afterwards, and
 several of them carried off by bad company, and left
 to fall into scandalous sins. As kindled coals, when laid
 together, do burn and afford a lasting heat, but, when
 separated from one another, they quickly go out; so
 it is with Christians that are kindled by grace: if they
 keep together, they quicken and enliven each other;
 but, if separate, they grow cold and dead, and are
 exposed to many temptations. Would ye withstand
 the assaults of the Devil and the world! then keep
 close together. I have known many tempted, sorrow-
 ful and dejected souls, who have been brought to the
 border of despair, wonderfully relieved and supported
 by going into the society of experienced Christians;
 therefore saith the Holy Spirit, *Two are better than
 one; for if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but
 wo to him that is alone when he falleth, for he hath not
 another to help him up.---And if one prevail against him,
 two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not
 quickly broken,* Eccl. iv. 9, 10, 12. The Devil is so
 sensible of the security which saints have against his
 assaults by religious societies, that he doth his utmost
 to hinder them, or break them in pieces. It was his
 grand artifice after the first planting of the gospel,
 when such societies did abound, to scatter them by
 persecution, that he might the more easily prevail
 against them by his temptations when destitute of one
 another's help. May the Lord defeat all his designs
 against your meeting, and keep your hearts in the
 love of God and of one another! To hear always of
 this, and of the increase and thriving state of such re-
 ligious associations in your city and neighbourhood,
 will gladden the heart of,

My dearly beloved,

Your sincere Friend and Servant in the Gospel of Christ,

JOHN WILLISON.

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T H E



T H E

Reverend Mr. JOHN BONAR'S

L E T T E R.

My dear and worthy young Gentlemen,

YOUR Letter, which I received a few days ago, was most acceptable to me; it gave me no small joy, when I heard formerly of your design, and saw your rules, whereof I heartily approve. I desire to bless God, that in this degenerate age, when Atheism, Infidelity, and all kind of wickedness abound, and especially amongst the younger sort; he of his mercy should incline the hearts of any, and you in particular, to venture out in the ways of God. You have begun well; may you still go forward in your Christian course! You will no doubt meet with solicitations from Satan, your corrupt nature, and a wicked world, to give over the enterprize; but stronger is he that is for you than all your enemies. Beware, I intreat you, of grieving the holy Spirit, by returning to folly. Great is the danger of backsliding; as will appear, if you consider these scriptures, Luke ix. 62. *No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.* Heb x. 38. *If any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.* 2 Pet. ii. 21. *It had been better for them not to*
have

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have known the way of righteousness, than after they have known it, to depart from the holy commandment delivered to them.

It is grace alone that establishes the heart. They that have no root, may endure for a while; but, when tribulation or persecution arises, they are ready to be offended. I shall offer you a few advices, which by the blessing of God, I hope, may be of some use to you.

1mo, Study to be well acquainted with the natural wickedness of your own hearts; this is a good, if not a distinguishing, mark betwixt a Christian and a hypocrite: the former will trace sin to its source, but the latter only seeks to restrain their open vices, which would expose them to the world. Let your search be diligent and accurate, and cry to God that he may try your heart and reins. You now run a very dangerous part of your race; youth adds a double strength to corruption, and gives temptation great advantage. Wherefore,

2do, Endeavour to take a serious back-look of your younger years. Reflect on the many sins and follies that there stand in record against you, and cry with your whole heart to God, that he may give you grace to mourn over them with real bitterness of soul.

3tio, You must not rest here (for a sorrow for sin, as some vainly imagine, will never atone for it) but cry earnestly to God, whom you have offended, for mercy and pardon. You have often heard of precious Christ and his righteousness, who is daily offered to you in the glorious gospel. O-plead for a day of his power, making all of you willing to embrace him. Receive him wholly in all his offices, as your alone and complete Saviour, desiring to be found in him, not having your own righteousness which is of the law, but the righteousness of God which is by faith in Christ. And endeavour to live a life of faith

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upon him; and O that *out of his fulness* you may be daily receiving, and grace for grace!

4^{to}, Count what religion may cost you. It is easy professing Christ in a time of prosperity; but when such days come as I have seen (and from which may the Lord ever preserve this poor land) I am afraid that many would go back. But lay your account with the very worst that can happen and resolve through grace to cleave to Christ, his truth and way all your days, Acts xi. 23.

5^{to}, Daily read and endeavour to be well acquainted with the holy scriptures, from which you may draw true wisdom and real knowledge.

6^{to}, Study soundness in the faith; and, for this end, read sound books; make the Confession of Faith and Catechisms perfectly your own; shun the company of such as are either of unsound principles or unsuitable conversations. It was a good advice of worthy Mr. Dyer, "Hear the best ministers, read the best books, and keep the best company."

7^{mo}, Wait close upon God in the way of his ordinances. Be frequent and fervent in prayer; and in every thing with prayer, supplication, and thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. He is a faithful friend, and able and willing to help. Be often putting up heart ejaculations, which may be of great use for fixing your hearts when employed in the affairs of this world. Watch over your hearts in the time of duty, and pray that God may by his holy Spirit make the word effectual for your salvation.

8^{vo}, Let your discourse be savoury, your whole conversation grave and circumspect, suitable to the profession you have made. Remember, you have many eyes upon you: the wicked will have their eyes upon you, waiting for your halting, and, if you carry not suitably, will be ready to reproach the ways of God on your account; the eyes of the godly are upon you, who will rejoice to see you walking in

in God's ways, and will be grieved for every slip that you make; the eye of conscience is always on you; but above all the eye of a holy and jealous God, to whom you must give an account of all your actions; wherefore endeavour to approve yourselves to him.

9mo, You are now setting out in the world in some one profession or other: be diligent and faithful therefore in your respective business. Beware of idleness and sloth, which is the mother of all vices: and let the glory of God, and your being useful in your generation, be still in view; and pray to him for success in your lawful endeavours.

These directions I give, as most necessary for you in all circumstances. I shall conclude with a few advices to you in your present situation; as,

1st, Keep your meetings punctually.

2dly, Observe your rules strictly; and, if any thing be blame-worthy in the conduct of any member, admonish him in love.

3dly, Be edifying in your conversation; and, for that end, always chuse in your meetings some head of divinity for discourse.

4thly, I recommend to you humility. Be not lifted up, as if you were beyond others, since the Lord has done good to your souls: *What have ye that ye have not received? and if ye have received it, why are you proud?* 1 Cor. iv. 7.

5thly, Take heed whom you admit as members of your society. Let them be of pious inclinations, sound in their principles, of a suitable walk, and such as will not spread what is among you, and such as are zealous for the interest of Christ.

I take your writing of me very kindly; and, if in any thing you need my advice and counsel, pray let me know, and it shall not be wanting. I conclude with the words of the apostle, 1 Thess. v. 23. *The very God of peace sanctify you wholly: and I pray God*

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God your whole spirit, soul and body may be preserved blameless to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. I am sincerely,

TORPHICHEN, April
14th, 1740.

Dear and worthy Gentlemen,

Your Souls Well-wisher and

Servant in the Lord,

JOHN BONAR.

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I N Q U I R Y, &c.

MAN is a creature made for society; it is not meet for him to be alone; his joys are tasteless while he has none to whom he can communicate them; and his sorrows are unsupportable without some to sympathize with him. Solitude, for the most part, at once, wearies and weakens the mind, while the company of our friends alleviates our pains, and gives a peculiar relish to all our pleasures. This powerful principle, this prevailing turn of mind, was, no doubt, implanted in our natures, for ends and purposes worthy of infinite wisdom and goodness, and appears calculated, at once, for the improvement and happiness of mankind; yet, alas! how oft is this (as indeed all the other gifts of God) perverted and prostituted to the worst and most fatal of purposes, to the debasing of society itself, and the ruin of multitudes of souls!

This is an evil of the most dangerous consequences; and, it is hoped, it will not be amiss, to inquire, *First*, Into the cause of this prevailing evil: and, *Secondly*, After the preventing means for rectifying or preventing it.

First, The causes of this dreadful abuse of the social temper, will readily appear, on considering,

1. That the generality of mankind have no wise, no just rule, by which they choose their companions. Multitudes found their friendship on no better grounds, than some involuntary relations, some casual alliances, or parity of circumstances, and the same sort of education. A similitude of tempers and characters, casual engagements in the affairs of civil life, party attachments and prejudices, and the like, give rise to the intimacies of many people; and, what is worst of all,

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all, too many instances shew, that like lusts and vices produce a most intimate correspondence, and close fellowship. The hater of God and of instruction thinks himself happy in the company that can turn religion into ridicule, and cast the words of the Lord behind them. The unjust person readily joins with the thief in sin; the unclean wretch will soon be persuaded to become partaker with the vile adulterer; and the malicious and envious readily relish a company, whose tongues are given to evil, and whose mouths frame deceit. Societies formed on such slight or criminal grounds, as they are directed by no just rule in chusing each other: So,

2. They have no valuable end, no useful purpose in view; and therefore no right, no virtuous rules, for regulating their conversation, or directing their friendships. It would be an overstraining of charity, to think, that, in such societies, the question would be, How to instruct? Or how to be edified? How to improve, each others minds? Or how to reform each others morals? On the contrary, fact, and experience, confirm the judgment our reason must make of persons so united. The grand design of such associations is, to please, and to be pleased; to amuse, to divert, and make each other merry, is the sole purpose; to say whatever we think may be agreeable, to do whatever may be acceptable to these we affect; to flatter each others passions; and to join, without remorse, in every lust, and every vice our companions incline to, is all that is requisite to constitute one a friend, and an intimate in such societies.-----While such principles govern the conversation and entertainment, what must the end be? We always find, that such communications, by degrees, erase any remaining sense of God and virtue; they incapacitate the soul for every social or religious duty, fear the conscience against all challenges, confirm the habits of the most criminal vices, until estates are oft ruined, health broken, and body and spirit worn out in the slavery of sin, give us melancholy instances

instances of the fruits of iniquity in this life, and just prebodings of the more dreadful sorrows it must bring on us in an eternal state.

3. These fatal evils are not confined to such societies alone.-----Confirmed habits of vice strip the soul of all modesty and decent reserve, and wear out all sense of shame. Vicious persons soon come to glory in their name, to declare their sin as Sodom; they are often heard in promiscuous companies, avowing their Libertine principles, and boasting of their abandoned practices; things so conformable to corrupt nature, as to steal upon unguarded minds; like the subtle poison, they please the taste, and flatter the senses, until they seize upon the whole frame, and work themselves into our very constitution. Thus does the infection of vice run from one to another, until the distemper becomes epidemic, and private follies grow up to national crimes.

What pity is it, that such a noble temper of mind, and sociality, should become the channel of vile iniquities, and the specious name by which our compliance with wicked persons is gilded! what a pity is it, that this disposition, so wisely calculated by infinite wisdom, for administering instruction, improvement, comfort, rational and solid delight, should be so abused, as to yield nothing but false and empty shadows of these noble advantages; and, in the mean time, bring on a ruining load of guilt and sorrow! could we prevail on mankind, to beware of this dangerous evil; could we persuade them, to take the methods which scripture and reason directs to, in order to shun such fatal communications; could we direct them to the proper improvement of the social character, it would be one great step, both towards a public and personal reformation. This leads me,

Secondly, To inquire into the proper method for rectifying or preventing this fatal abuse.-----For this purpose, the following rules are universally known, and often prescribed; but it must not be thought trifling

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ling to mention them, or to insist on them, until people be prevailed on, to direct their friendships by them.

1. That in the choice of our companions, we should, with the utmost caution, shun all intimacy with persons of vicious principles or immoral practices. --- Every body pretends a fondness for what they call good company; but the generality seem to mean no more by this expression, than a fondness for persons who can most effectually divert them (perhaps from the most important cares, or most essential duties of life) or for such as most readily join them, in their humours, passions, parties, or even in their favourite vices: but, if we would suffer words to retain their proper meaning, if we would not put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter, or call evil good, and good evil, we must reckon the man, whose principles are immoral, or his practice vicious, a dangerous, a bad companion, however facetious and diverting, or how capable soever he may be, to amuse or humour us. Wherever we find a person undervaluing the obligations of religion and reason, where we find one asserting or admitting principles inconsistent with Christianity, or the interests of society, where we find one indulging himself in the practice of any known folly or vice, whatever such person's faculties be, whatever their station or character be, we must, as commanded, 2 Thess. iii. 6. *Withdraw from such as walk disorderly, and not after the tradition received from the apostles.*

One should think this rule would effectually determine people, when persons are known to be openly profligate, or grossly scandalous, That, in such cases, every one, who retains the moral sense; would say with Jacob, Gen xlix. 6. *O my soul, come not thou into their secret; unto their assembly mine honour be not thou united* But there is a certain fatal, though unobserved presumption, lodging in every breast; at first we look on such persons with horror, and conclude it impossible for us to become like them; we think ourselves incapable of being reconciled to their ways, much less capable

capable to imitate them; but, alas! we find, by many experiences, that all that is needed is but to associate with such persons, and we will soon come, not only to resemble, but even to equal their crimes. The horror we at first, conceived against their principles and practices soon wears off; and these, from being familiar, soon become agreeable.----We are brought insensibly to indulge in some follies, which, by being more common, are thought less criminal.----It is but a step from a smaller to a greater crime, and the unwary person, who once indulges himself in intimacies with vicious companions, readily goes from bad to worse, until, by degrees, he arrives at the height of impiety, and so to extreme and irrecoverable misery.

The same dangerous evils threaten such intimacies as may be formed among persons, who, though of innocent characters, yet propose no other end by their friendships, than pleasure and diversion. When these are the only purposes of their societies, every thing is readily dispensed with, that stands in the way of them; the most necessary duties are neglected; their passion for pleasure soon leads them from things merely amusing, to these vices, which, by being fashionable, or delightful, come to appear less horrid: and, as has been already observed, if once we enter into a vicious life, we will very soon sink in wickedness.

These observations are confirmed to us by daily experience, and should therefore determine mankind, with the utmost caution, to shun all intimacy with those whose conversation may seduce, or with those from whose friendship we have no reasonable prospect of some solid benefit; or, at least, a prospect of communicating some benefit to them;---especially, as we have the express command of the sacred oracles, to this very purpose, 2 Cor. v. 11. *Is any man that is called a brother, a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner, we must not only give up intimacy with such, but are commanded with such an one no not to eat.* Nay, the scripture

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speaks of the society of evil-doers, as really inconsistent with a religious course of life; and therefore the Psalmist says, Psal. cxix. 115. *Depart from me, ye wicked, for I have purposed to keep the commandments of my God.*---Indeed, while we are duly affected with the danger arising from such society, we will join with the prayer of the Psalmist, Psal. xxviii. 3. *Draw me not away with the wicked.*

2. The same reasons, which should determine us to shun the fellowship of vicious persons, should engage us to choose, as our companions, persons of such a character, as that their friendship and conversation may tend to the real and solid purposes of society; that is, to improve each others minds; to form each others manners; to encourage one another in the ways of truth and righteousness; to comfort one another, under our several distresses, of whatever nature; to advise one another, in all intricacies, to share in the joys, or bear a part in the griefs we mutually feel; to join with one another in religious exercises; and, in a word, to keep up with us, the communion of saints, in the most intimate manner.

Persons disposed and qualified for such friendship as this, are peculiar blessings to all conversant with them, and singularly dear to such as are of a similar character, and have the happiness of being intimate with them. If therefore we would, like the Psalmist, *Be a companion of all them that fear God, and of them that keep his commandments,* we will also, like him, have our delight in the saints that are in the earth, the excellent, &c. A wise and well disposed person, should for this cause, look out for his friends and companions among persons of such a character as this. Do we find one maintaining a high sense of sacred truths; his affections engaged to things that are excellent, his conduct of a piece with his profession, and his intimates of the same character with himself? Such an one we ought to affect; his friendship is indeed worthy our seeking

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seeking it; and, if we study the same things, we will readily obtain that blessing.

Bad as the world is, we may upon due inquiry find many such companions as those described; (at least, many whose ambition it is, to attain to such a character as this I have mentioned; whom we are therefore bound to esteem, and to delight in.) And how agreeable must such a society be? such valuable friends best know their own happiness, and will readily be determined to what I am to name as a third rule, viz.

3. That we should be at all pains to cultivate and improve our friendship with our Christian companions. A desire after Christian fellowship natively flows from these very principles which make a wise man love and esteem his friend: namely, to attain the real, and valuable ends of society; and with this view, virtuous intimates ought to enter into the closest engagements one with another;----to take all opportunities which conveniency can allow, for conversing one with another, and to devote their leisure hours to the amiable exercise of Christian fellowship with each other. I therefore propose it, as one of the most effectual and excellent methods for improving the social temper and character; "That such Christian friends should form themselves into a regular society, having fixed and stated times, and places of meeting; for the more effectual attaining, or communicating the useful purposes of friendship."

While I propose this method, I am sensible, that a great many persons are not satisfied of the reasonableness of religious associations, or fellowship meetings, or society meetings, as they are sometimes called. Many objections are made against this method, by persons of all characters. Some question, whether we have any warrant from scripture for such societies? Some object a great many evils which have sprung or may arise from the abuse, or mismanagement of them. Some are determined against such meetings, because the church of Scotland (in that time, which some think he.

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her purest) has declared against them; and even those people who otherwise approve of such meetings, complain that many rules would be requisite to prevent the many evils, which human imperfection readily produces in them.

I shall therefore with all humility essay,

I. To show that we have a real warrant for such societies, both from scripture, and the reasonableness of the thing.

II. I shall endeavour to obviate such objections, as I have heard against them.

III. I shall offer some regulations, for preventing the evils or inconveniencies complained of, and for the more effectually obtaining the valuable purposes of such religious engagements.

I. I am to show, That the scriptures, and the reasonableness of the thing, give a real and encouraging warrant for such social engagements, as those we now speak of; and to this purpose let us observe,

First, These many passages of scripture, which by representing Christians, as standing in the dearest, and most intimate relations to each other, do point out the obligation they lie under to maintain the most intimate fellowship and correspondence with each other, which their respective circumstances, and situation can admit of. Thus they are represented as *fellow citizens*, Eph. ii. 19 who have the same privileges, and the same interests: As *fellow soldiers*, Phil. ii. 25. who have the same enemies and warfare: As *fellow servants*, Rev. vi. 11. who have one master, one task, one reward: as children of the same father, and heirs of the same inheritance, Rom. viii. 17. And therefore, as brethren, as members of the same body, and *every one members one of another*, Rom. xii. 5. and thus standing in the dearest, and most indissoluble relation that can be represented.---If then it is natural for fellow citizens, when in a foreign country, to seek out each other;---if people of the same dialect and manners readily join in society with one another;---if the servants of the same

same master claim a sort of relation to each other;---
 if the children of the same father look on themselves
 as having joint interests, and as separate from others;
 --if these relations engage them to intimate associa-
 tions; how much more should Christians be engaged to
 the most close correspondence, and the most familiar
 intercourse with one another? Are they not fellow-
 citizens with the saints, though in a strange land?
 Are they not disciples of the same Lord, and servants
 of the same sovereign Master? Are they not exposed to
 the same enemies, to the same, or at least, to like dif-
 ficulties, dangers, and distresses? Have they not one
 interest and hope? Is not then a stricter union, a more
 immediate intimacy, and a closer degree of correspond-
 ence, necessary for the mutual support and succour of
 Christians, in matters of infinite importance, than what
 is requisite for the little and low concerns of human
 life? Every body allows it to be a wise and reasonable
 thing, that people of the same profession, who are en-
 gaged together in business or trade, should form them-
 selves into clubs or societies; in order to inform each
 other of whatever may be for their interests: to consult
 and advise together, for rectifying what may be amiss,
 or for improving their joint benefit. Is it not a more
 reasonable and wise thing, that Christians, who are u-
 nited by such intimate relations, whose interests and
 dangers are so much the same, should gather together
 in social meetings, in order to instruct, to admonish,
 to comfort, to encourage each other; in one word, to
 consult together, and jointly to engage in such exercises,
 as may promote their common interests, and may tend
 to the immediate benefit of every particular? Though
 I do not say, that we cannot discharge the obligations,
 which the relations mentioned lay us under to each
 other, without such engagements as these proposed;
 yet I think I may at least assert, that such engagements
 are the most proper, the most direct, and most effectual
 methods for this end. But this consideration will ap-
 pear in a stronger light, by observing,

Secondly,

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Secondly, The many passages of scripture which expressly recommend religious fellowship to us; and in order to that, social engagements one with another. Such is the injunction of the wise man, Eccl. iv. 9, 12. *Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labour: for if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but wo to him that is alone when he falleth, for he hath not another to help him up again. If two lie together, then they have heat, but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him. A threefold cord is not easily broken.* But what is more to our purpose, we find such social engagements expressly recommended, with a view to these very ends and purposes, which are proposed by society meetings. As 1st, For increasing our knowledge of the ways of God: thus the apostle commands, Col. iii. 16. *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing in Psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs.* 2^{dly}, For the more effectual exercise of Christian sympathy with one another. In such societies as are proposed, we can open our breasts, and tell our sorrows, our weaknesses, and griefs, to our Christian friends, (at least with more freedom than to any others) and may hope to find in them that friendly disposition required, Rom. xv. 1, 2. *We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves, but let every one of us please his neighbour, for his good to edification.* Or that social temper commanded, Gal. vi. 2. *Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.* While we have the opportunity of fulfilling the command, James v. 16. *Confess your faults one to another, and pray for one another that ye may be healed.* 3^{dly}, Such societies is further intended, for Christians encouraging one another in the ways of godliness, and so one of the most effectual methods for fulfilling the apostolic precept, Heb. x. 24, 15. *Let us consider one another, to provoke unto love, and to good works. Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting*

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...ing one another, and so much the more as ye see the
 ...y approaching. 4thly, Another end of fellowship
 meetings, is, that of our communicating our gifts
 and graces, to each others edification: agreeable to
 the command of the apostle, 1 Pet. iv. 10. *As every
 one hath received the gift, even so minister the same one
 to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.*
 5thly, Such religious associations give the best oppor-
 tunities for Christians to act the part of kind monitors
 to each other: and thus to fulfil the important pre-
 cepts, 1 Thess. v. 11. *Now we exhort you, brethren,
 warn them which are unruly, comfort the feeble-minded,
 support the weak.* And Heb. iii. 13. *Exhort one an-
 other daily, while it is called to-day, lest any of you be
 hardened, through the deceitfulness of sin.* 6thly, The
 1st, and indeed one of the most valuable purposes of
 fellowship meetings I name, is that of our joining to-
 gether in prayer, praises, and other spiritual exercises.
 To this we have the most powerful and engaging en-
 couragement, from the words of the blessed Redeemer,
 Matth. xviii. 19, 20. *Again I say unto you, if two of you
 shall agree upon earth, as touching any thing they shall
 ask, it shall be done for them of my Father who is in hea-
 ven. For where two or three are met together in my
 name, there I am in the midst of them.*-----To sum up
 this argument, these duties which the scriptures re-
 quire of Christians, to each other, seem immediately
 founded on the relations subsisting betwixt them.
 And both these lay them under the strongest obliga-
 tions, to take the most proper and effectual methods, in
 order to discharge these duties, as far as circumstances
 and opportunities will admit. And it appears plain,
 that without such intimate social engagements as these
 proposed, the above-named duties cannot be effectually
 discharged; but on the other hand, it seems self-evi-
 dent that society meetings, (when under proper regu-
 lations) have the most immediate tendency to the noble
 purposes which have been mentioned; and therefore
 though we do not conclude, that such societies are of
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positive divine institution, yet we may at least infer, that they have such warrant from scripture, as loudly calls every active Christian to be engaged in them. As a further confirmation of this, let us observe,

Thirdly, The encouraging testimony, which God in the scriptures gives to such societies: to this purpose, I shall mention no other than that remarkable passage, Mal. iii. 16, 17. *Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another, and the Lord hearkened and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels, and I will spare them as a man spareth his son that serveth him.* This text appears to be in the most express manner, encouraging to such religious societies as I propose; and I cannot understand it in any other sense, than as pointing out the exercise of the devout Jews: while the most of that people were saying, *it is vain to serve God*, ver. 14. and called *the proud happy*; yea *they that work wickedness were set up*.---When religion was openly despised, and vice avowedly encouraged: then those who feared the Lord, who served him, and thought upon his name, sought each other out, they often met, they often conversed together; they consulted how they might escape the pollutions of the world; how they might support and establish one another against the prevailing vices of that age; and that they might encourage each other in the ways of righteousness. In this view the text gives us a scripture pattern for the societies proposed. And this leads me to observe,

Fourthly, That both the Old and New Testaments give us many examples of such religious societies, as seem a very strong warrant for fellowship meetings. I shall name but a few.-----Under the Old Testament, we find Job and his three friends meeting, to enquire why the Lord contended with him, and joining together in prayer and sacrifices.-----The example of the Psalmist appears yet more expressly to our purpose;

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he tells us, Psal. xvi. 2. That he delighted in the saints. He tells us, Psal. lv. 13, 14. That he chose such as he thought feared God, as his equals, his guides and companions, and took sweet counsel together with them. And, Psal. lxvi. 16. he cheerfully communicates to such what spiritual blessings God had bestowed on him. *Come here, says he, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul.* Do not these texts, compared together, shew that the Psalmist engaged himself in such religious correspondence with those that feared God, as is proposed by society meetings?---- If so, then he gives us such an instance of religious fellowship, as warrants Christians to engage in such societies.-----To the same purpose I may cite the examples of Esther and her virgins, Esther iv. 16. of the devout Jews at the streams of Babel, Psal. cxxxvii. 1, &c. and that of Daniel and his companions, Dan. ii. 17, 18. But I rather proceed to observe, That the New Testament affords many encouraging examples to this duty: Such is that infallible one of our blessed Lord and Master, in his retired commerce with his disciples, as recorded by all the Evangelists. This we find was a copy given to his disciples, which they accordingly imitated, as appears from Luke xxiv. 1, 33. John xx. 19, 26, &c. and thus give examples to us. Such is the society mentioned, Acts i. 14. *who all continued with one accord, in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brethren.* Acts xii. 12. we find, that *in the house of Mary the mother of John, many were gathered together praying.* Such another society appears in the house of Cornelius (Acts x. 27.) obtaining signal favour from God. And Acts xvi. 13. we hear of a society accustomed to meet for prayer by a river side.-----But, without multiplying scripture texts or examples, I shall conclude all I have said concerning scripture warrant for society meetings, by observing, That the great purpose of such is spiritual conference and prayer; and therefore, every

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scripture, recommending these duties, may justly be considered as favouring, yea warranting such social engagements as these we plead for; especially considering,

Fifthly, That such religious association is, in itself, a reasonable and wise method for attaining or communicating the real and solid benefits of friendship. What has been said concerning the relations in which Christians stand one to another, seems not only to prove that such societies are reasonable, but even that they are requisite. All that remains then, is for the encouragement of Christians, to point out some of these advantages which are to be attained by such fellowship, when duly regulated. And, *1st*, Such a method of correspondence is of great use for communicating and receiving knowledge. What we hear in conversation with others, is generally, I may say always, better understood, and more effectually retained than what we read by ourselves, or even hear in sermons. The reason of this is obvious, *viz.* That what passes in conversation falls more immediately and more intimately under our consideration. While we hear the opinions of others on the subject, we have at the same time the opportunity of reasoning on it, judging of it, and expressing our own sentiments of it; by which means, the evidence of truth appears in a clearer light; our ideas of it are more distinct, and the impression made on the mind by it, is, at once more lively and more lasting. What improvement then, may be expected in knowledge, when every member brings along with him what he has come to know in reading, hearing, meditating, or in the course of experience or providence, and makes these the subject of his conversation with his Christian intimates? By this means, *2^{dly}*, The mind comes to be more deeply affected, and more influenced by sacred things: while we talk of these things with one another, a sense of them grows upon the heart; they appear in their true light and real importance. This is an advantage of unspeakable importance,

portance, as it has the strongest tendency, *3dly*, To engage our affections to heavenly objects and attainments, and to alienate them from vanities; the more we learn of the evil of sin, the more will we grieve for it, and hate it; the more we know of our exalted Saviour, the more will we adore and love him, and with the more ardour will we seek after him; the more we know of the excellency of the divine precepts, our indignation at sin will be quickened, and our desires after universal holiness will become more ardent; and the more we know of the blessed fruits of righteousness, our fervour and activity will increase in proportion. And thus, *4thly*, Such fellowship proves an excellent mean for encouraging a Christian in his course, for comforting him when under discouragements, and for reviving when ready to faint by the way. Many times does the devout, though discouraged soul, find the truth of the scripture proverb, Prov. xxvii. 17. *As iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.* Oft has the Christian, when ready to sink with heaviness, complaining of his cold heart, and staggering faith, found a lively feeling of divine truths, a glowing love, and transporting hope, arising from such fellowship; and that grace, which, without spiritual correspondence, is ready to die, is oft by such society quickened and increased, as live coals, which, when scattered, soon extinguish, but, when kept together, burn with a brighter flame. Such companions, like labourers engaged in one task, or fellow travellers on the same road, do, by such fellowship, cheer each other to their work; they stir up the grace that is in them; they put one another in remembrance of their obligations, their duty, their danger, and their glorious prospect, while, by mutual sympathy, counsel and prayer, they prove means of procuring for each other direction, comfort and aid. *5thly*, Such intimacies give the best opportunities for mutual admonitions, for their common security, against the many hazards they run, of
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swerving from duty, through the influence of the world, and the craft of the wicked one, an advantage which every one who knows the depravity of his own mind, will highly value. To all these advantages let me add, *6thly*, The peculiar benefits which are to be obtained in the exercise of prayer. There is not only a peculiar beauty in social religion, but the scriptures and experience assure us, that peculiar blessings are to be obtained in the exercise of it. When two or three are met together, in the name of the Lord Jesus, and united to one another in love, do with one heart agree in putting their prayers to their Father in heaven, who can tell the blessed efficacy of such an exercise? The benefit is not confined to themselves; the congregation, the country side, the nation itself to which they pertain, oft reap the advantage, and obtain the blessing from the hearer of prayer. Had but five righteous persons been found in the wicked city of Sodom, &c. their ruin had been prevented. The prayers of Mordecai and the devout Jews prevailed to disappoint the most dangerous scheme that ever was formed against that people. Daniel and his companions obtained the revelation of the king's dream, and saved both themselves and the wise men of Babylon from impending destruction. The religious society assembled in the house of Mary, and praying for Peter, obtained their request for the deliverance of the apostle, while yet they were putting it up. In a word, we may say of the prayer of faith, Heb. xi 33. That through it the saints received promises. And indeed the experience of all that ever observed God's appearances for his church and people in any age, confirm the scripture testimony on this head, and concur in assuring us, that where God is pleased to pour out a spirit of prayer, it is a never-failing sign of his being about to bestow the most distinguishing blessings of his gracious providence.

On the whole, I presume it appears evident, that the scriptures, and the reasonableness of the thing itself, give us a real and encouraging warrant for such social

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engagements as these we propose. That we ought therefore to regard society meetings, as a wise and excellent method, which, by its concurrence with that strong turn our minds have to society, has a noble influence in securing us against the fatal evils we are exposed to, by correspondence with persons of vicious principles, or immoral practices; and, at the same time, has an immediate tendency to procure for us that satisfaction, that improvement, and all these advantages which are the ultimate ends of the social temper. And I cannot but think, that the considerations mentioned would engage every serious Christian to seek out, and join himself to such societies, was it not that they apprehend, that such meetings have been, or may be attended with bad consequences, or that they think some other objections relevant to determine them to decline such fellowship. I therefore proceed to the second thing I proposed,

II. To enquire into these objections which have been made against fellowship meetings, and endeavour to obviate them.

The following are the principal, if not the only objections I have had occasion to hear made against this way.

First, That, in many instances, their best purposes have been perverted; that, by mismanagements, they have proven seminaries of error, division, contention, and schism, which, not confined to the society, has often weakened the hands of gospel ministers, and has even embroiled the country side, yea, the church itself. -----In answering this, it must be owned, that sometimes the evils complained of have happened. But we must observe, *1st*, That it is allowed that these evils do not flow from religious societies as such, but only through mismanagement: so that if any regulations can be proposed, by which such abuse may be prevented, the objection must fall of course (and how far this is obtained, by the rules offered in the sequel of this discourse, the reader will judge.) But, *2^{dly}*, It appears,

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appears, that such religious associations are excellent methods, warranted by scripture, and tending to procure the noble advantages for Christians duly exercised in them; and, to assert that such are to be neglected by ourselves, or discouraged in others, because of possible mismanagements or abuses, must be very absurd. It is certain the pulpit itself has been abused and prostituted to the worst of purposes; too often it has ceased from being an oracle of God, and has become an incentive to murders, rebellions, massacres, and what not? We still see it perverted in some instances, to spread errors, schisms, contention, and division, among Christians. But would any man that professes religion say, That therefore preaching should be altogether suppressed? No surely! we would readily propose, that where the pulpit is thus abused, such preachers ought to be restrained, and the whole order laid under proper regulations; and undoubtedly the same reasoning should take place here, or, if it is not admitted, the argument will carry us to the most unreasonable extravagancies. If this be a conclusive argument, that societies, meeting for prayer and spiritual conference, have been mismanaged, and therefore ought to be deserted and suppressed; it will equally hold as a good argument, some societies of private men have hatched treason; and therefore, no private men should, at any time, meet together; or, there is no sacred ordinance, nor civil institution, which has not actually been, or at least may be abused; and therefore the whole of both these should be for ever suppressed. And thus if the objection be of any force, it concludes as strongly against almost all engagements in society, as against the religious institution we plead for.

Secondly, There is another objection much urged against society meetings; namely, That the church of Scotland have, by their directory for secret and private worship, which is ratified by their act, August 24th, 1647, Sess. 19. Sect. 7. declared such meetings intolerable. Their words are these, "Whatever have
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been the effects and fruits of meetings of persons of divers families, in the times of corruption and trouble (in which cases many things are commendable, which otherwise are not tolerable) yet when God hath blessed us with peace and purity of the gospel, such meetings of persons of divers families are to be disapproved, as tending to the hindrance of the religious exercise of each family by itself, to the prejudice of the public ministry, to the renting of the families of particular congregations, and in process of time, of the whole kirk, besides many offences which may come thereby, to the hardening of the hearts of carnal men, and grief of the godly."-----

Whatever regard I have for that body of men, who constituted that assembly; yet I must take the liberty to observe, 1st, That it is our happiness, that that Act, Ass. 1638, December 17. sess. 23, 24. is not now in force; by it they ordain, "That from henceforth, no sort of person, of whatsoever quality or degree, be permitted to speak or write against the said confession (that is the national covenant,) this assembly, or any act of this assembly, and that under the pain of incurring the censures of this kirk." It may be reasonably thought that a body of men so jealous of their credit, and so apprehensive of the censures which might be made on their conduct, as to pass such an Act as this, (so tyrannical, and laying such a heavy restraint on the freedom of conversation among persons of whatever quality or degree) would of course, and from the same motives prohibit all such meetings as might at any time examine or complain of their proceedings. Not that I think it allowable for society meetings to canvass or censure the proceedings of assemblies: (the contrary will appear in its proper place.) But I dare say every thinking person will agree with the Rev. Mr. Currie in his essay on separation, in pronouncing both the above-cited acts to be unreasonable, unwarrantable, and tyrannical.----- But the assembly seems to give some plausible reasons for prohibiting

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such meetings. Let us then, *2dly*, See of what force they are. *1st*, The assembly speaks of them as allowable, yea commendable in times of trouble and corruption, but not tolerable while we enjoy peace and purity of the gospel. Strange! That it is our duty to join in conference and prayer when in danger or trouble, and yet intolerable when enjoying peace, &c. In times of corruption and trouble, no doubt Christians will be more frequent and fervent in these exercises, but why must they be laid aside in all other events?---No doubt lest they presume to censure people, who would be thought infallible. But further, is there any time when Christians are not in danger of corruption, through the influence of persons of bad principles and morals? If therefore such meetings be preservatives against this danger, are they not always commendable?-----*2dly*, The assembly seems to innuendate, that all the purposes of such religious meetings may be obtained in the exercise of family religion: and that therefore the meetings of persons of diverse families is to be discouraged, as tending to the hindrance of the religious exercise of each family by itself.-----I am aware, that this consideration of family religion would probably be objected against all I have said about the expediency or necessity of a religious correspondence among Christians. I have referred giving any answer to it until now; when I am to observe, *1st* That though family religion is at once lovely, useful and indeed necessary, yet that intimate religious correspondence proposed by fellowship meetings, and the benefits to be obtained by such, do appear to be seldom if ever attainable by the exercise of family religion alone. How rarely will we find a family, of which all or even the greater part are either qualified or disposed for religious conversation? How oft is a sincere and active Christian classed in a family, whose other members are absolutely averse to religious exercises? And would it not be exceeding hard to shut such an one up from religious intimacies? But, *2dly*, Let us even suppose a whole

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whole family disposed to religious correspondence with one another, yet I see no reason why such correspondence should be confined to the family; on the contrary, Christians are commanded to make their light shine before men, and as every man has received the gift, even to minister the same one to another, &c. It seems highly reasonable, and even the duty of the members of a well disposed family, to enter into fellowship meetings with neighbouring Christians, in order to attain these valuable purposes. But perhaps it will be objected in terms of the act, that such meetings tend to the hinderance of the religious exercise of each family by itself. I must therefore add, *3dly*, That this reason against society meetings seems to be the most singular of any I have ever heard suggested. With the same reason we may object against every duty of religion, whether public or private, because that some times they may come to interfere, and so prove a hinderance to one another. For the hinderance alledged to be given by fellowship meetings to family religion, cannot be understood any other way, than by the one interfering with the other, because in all other views, the religious exercises in which we join with neighbouring Christians, render us at once better qualified for family religion, and more disposed to it. ---The other reasons mentioned in this act against fellowship meetings, have been already taken notice of in the answer to first objection. And I presume that every reader will allow, that this act so tyrannical in itself, and supported by such weak or extravagant reasons, ought to have no influence to restrain from engagements so reasonable as these we propose.

Thirdly, There is yet another objection which it will be expected I should take notice of, though mostly urged by persons from whom no encouragement to religious societies of any kind can be expected. It is this, that such meetings tend to divert people, whose bread depends on their daily labour, from attending their civil callings. For my part, I should be as loath as

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any body, to advise or encourage people to any thing that should prevent their proper labours, or keep them from an honest industry for earning their food. But sure no body can think that a few hours once a week, or perhaps, but once a fortnight, can give any considerable hinderance, or prove a real prejudice. On the contrary, it would seem that such religious interviews should rather be a furtherance, because the more lively a Christian is in the frame of his own mind, the more alert will he be in every other exercise: the more he is established in the principles of Christianity, the more conscientious and diligent will he be, doing with all his might, what his hand findeth to do. He will labour more chearfully, and also more successfully. So that if conscience and diligence are valuable qualities in a work-man, the religious engagements I recommend, must be reckoned valuable means for improving these ----- The severest task-master will not grudge the meanest slave some hours for relaxation, and the closest application must allow some time for this purpose; but relaxation does not consist in the body or mind's ceasing from action, but in changing the direction of their aims and exercises, I would then ask the most zealous promoter of industry, whether of the two he would most approve of? Whether the devout, conscientious, and laborious workman, who devotes his leisure hours to conference and prayer with his friends of the same character? Or that man who associates himself with vain, light or profligate persons, wastes his gain in ale-houses, and his leisure time in folly or crimes? If the first of these be his choice, there can be no room for this objection.

It appears, I think, evidently from what has been said, That fellowship meetings have a real and encouraging warrant, both from scripture, and the reasonableness of the thing; and that no relevant objection lies against them, if so be they come under due regulations. This leads me,

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III. To offer some regulations, for preventing the inconveniencies and evils complained of, and for the more effectual obtaining the valuable purposes of religious fellowship.

Attempts have been made this way already, by very good hands, but it is a pity they confine themselves to general observations and rules, which most of people mind but as generals, and therefore readily indulge themselves in exceptions. It seems therefore necessary to condescend in the most particular manner, on the peculiar causes of the evils complained of, and on the proper way to prevent these, and of obtaining the benefits in view. For this end, I shall, *1st*, Enquire into the causes of the evils complained of; and I shall endeavour to keep them in view, while, *2^{dly}*, I offer the rules which seem proper for remedying those evils, and for procuring the benefits, for which society was ultimately intended.

First, The abuses which have so often crept into society meetings, and the mischiefs which flow from these, have, for the most part, if not altogether, proceeded from one or other of the following causes. Either,

1. From the characters and dispositions of the members. These often prove incompatible with the union and interests of societies, especially religious ones. Should we suppose a parcel of hypocrites, who have nothing of religion but a name and profession, yet forming themselves into a society meeting, and carrying on the cheat on themselves, their fellows, and the world; the best we could expect from such would be but noise and affectation. The fruits of such meetings must be to rivet one another in their foolish prejudices; and to improve each other in a shew of religion, whilst they remain strangers to its reality. To learn opinionativeness in room of steadiness, false zeal instead of true ardour for God, enthusiasm in place of divine influences, haughtiness for humility, security instead of faith, and formality in place of real godliness.

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godliness. Where these prevail, there, all that is complained of or feared from fellowship meetings, does natively arise. Men do not look for grapes from thistles, nor for figs from thorns; and we may sooner expect that persons who are strangers to the profession, as well as to the reality of religion, should attain the ends of society meetings, than those we speak of. But without confining the supposition to societies entirely formed of empty professors, we may observe, That wherever such persons have access and influence, the like evils appear, though perhaps in a lower degree. If there is but one member of a society who has not the important ends of a Christian fellowship in view; who wants no more by his membership but to gain a name and character, without being at pains to deserve it, such a man readily is, or will soon become proud, opinionative, censorious, assuming, &c. and while his profession blinds weak and diffident Christians, he many times engages them to follow him in his extravagancies and follies; while he diverts the society from their proper purposes, he leads them to courses quite opposite.----These considerations ought to engage us to the utmost caution in chusing our companions, and admitting members into our societies, and for these reasons I have insisted the more on them. But what we ought to consider more attentively is, that even where persons who are really exercised in godliness are associated together; and where we might hope for the happiest effects, yet even there the skill of Satan, and the deceitfulness of our own hearts, defeat our hopes and bring on a sad reverse of them. Oft does that enemy of our souls (though we are not ignorant of his devices) take advantage of our weakness; while he finds too much matter in our corrupt minds to work on, by which he ruins society. ---As by exciting the pride of our first parents in paradise, he found the way to ruin human society even in its birth, so by that same art, he often prevails to destroy that unity, which is essential to Christian fellowship.

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lowship. When a member of such society comes to think more highly of himself than he ought to think, when he becomes conceited of his own gifts, and proud of his attainments or other peculiarities, he naturally falls into all that train of evils which undo society. Fond of himself he becomes insensible to the excellencies of his companions, or even begrudges them.----- He grows blind to his own imperfections and errors, but a ready discerner of the failings or faults of his neighbours. This makes him despise every body whose graces and gifts he thinks short of his own; and at the same time, makes him judge thus of every one he converses with. Such sentiments soon render him incapable of the social virtues, but under the fatal influence of these dispositions which are opposite to friendship. He becomes haughty, arrogant, assuming, every thing must be done by his direction, nothing is to be approved if he is not satisfied, nor any thing agreed to if it be not his opinion.---In a word, his will must be the law of the society, he grows stiff and positive, and if he is not humoured, he becomes sullen, cross, fretful, hot, yea passionate. We may easily conceive, it will be extremely difficult for his companions to brook such a temper. Few people are possessed of such degrees of meekness and patience, as would be requisite to bear with such an one, however useful otherwise. Admonition would be lost on a person of this character, so that wherever this temper is indulged, the happiness of that society necessarily falls; mutual affection, confidence, good will and sympathy soon cease, while jealousy, discord, ill-will, resentment, malice, wrath, &c. brood on each other, until such societies, from being seats of love and union, become scenes of contention and seminaries of discord; and the evils begun in private societies oft come to spread from one to another, until the community is embroiled by it.

What a watchful guard then should every member of society in general, particularly such as profess religious

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gious fellowship, keep over their own hearts, lest at any time they become high minded, and thus fall into the snare of the Devil? With what care should every Christian watch over the motions of his own breast; lest that cunning enemy steal in upon the unguarded minds? Do we find our tempers becoming warm, do we become stiff in our peculiar opinions, are we fretted by contradiction, do we find a coldness in our affections to such as differ from us, feel we a pleasure in observing and publishing the faults of our neighbours? By each of these our pride is demonstrated: these dispositions render us unfit, yea dangerous members of any and of every society: they naturally tend to break the peace of families, congregations, presbyteries, and every social engagement whether public or private, sacred or civil, as well as these we now speak of.

Secondly, Another cause producing the evils complained of from religious societies, is mismanagements in their meetings with each other. It is indeed no more practicable to condescend on all the errors such meetings may fall into, than it is to describe all the mistakes we may fall into in the course of life. I shall name but the following, as what appear both more common and more fatal to these societies.

1st, The indulging of idle and trivial conversation.----- This, though innocent itself, yet becomes really criminal, while it prevents more useful exercises, oft cuts them out altogether, and readily introduces a more fatal though a more specious abuse, *viz.* *2^{dly}*, Foolish and unprofitable questions and disputes, even on scripture subjects, the solution of which can be given by no mortal, nor would it profit us though obtained. This abuse natively leads, *3^{dly}*, To a daring and overcurious prying into the mysteries of revelation; they would be wise above what is written, but they darken knowledge by words without wisdom; they turn aside into vain janglings, desiring to be teachers of the law, yet neither understanding what they say,

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say nor whereof they affirm. Thus they become heady and notional, and their meetings prove a source of error and heresy. This humour is always connected with, *4thly*, An insatiable itch to meddle in the controversies of the day. They readily decide and determine in all questions, even in these matters in which ministers and Christians, the most distinguished for learning and grace both now and in all ages have differed: or differing in opinion, each with other, they come to split, and prove semenaries of schism in a country-side. This natively brings them, *5thly*, To criticise on the conduct of ministers, and others, with whom they have nothing to do: a practice which soothes their vanity, while it nourishes their pride, and introduces self-conceit, presumption, contempt of ordinances, disregard to ministers, &c. &c.

These mismanagements appear the more dangerous when we observe, how intimately they are connected one with another. They creep into societies, they gain strength quickly, though almost imperceptibly, and oft remain undiscovered until they are no more to be corrected: our only security therefore against these is to keep at the utmost distance from the very least of them.

To these above named causes of the complaints made against society meetings, I might add, that members by want of tenderness to each other in civil life, or by indiscretion in their behaviour toward those that are strangers to their profession and fellowship, have oft injured society, have broke their unity, and made them and their members fall into contempt. But these and others I will probably have occasion to point out in the regulations intended.

Perhaps some people will think, that what I have said concerning the characters of member of society meetings, and the dangers of mismanaging these, is a stronger argument against such fellowship than all I have advanced in their favours. Before I leave the subject I shall therefore observe, that these evils are

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no other than what almost all societies in the world are exposed to, at least, we cannot conceive any two or three persons conferring together about religious things, but we must perceive the same evils as threatening their correspondence, as society meetings are exposed to. I shall therefore in the regulations proposed, endeavour to lay down such rules as may not only direct in the religious engagements proposed, but may be of use to qualify and dispose us to act a proper part in every social engagement in life. I therefore proceed,

Secondly, To offer some rules which seem proper for remedying the evils complained of, and for procuring the benefits for which society was ultimately intended. To this purpose, I shall, *1st*, Offer some rules relating to the temper and character, which members of religious societies ought to study themselves, and by which they ought to chuse their companions. *2^{dly}*, I shall offer some rules relating to the proper exercise of religious societies in their meetings together. *3^{dly}*, I shall offer some directions relating to their conduct toward each other in civil life. And, *4^{thly}*, I shall mention some of these obligations which relate to their behaviour towards those that are without, and are strangers to their profession and fellowship.

First, I am to offer some rules by which members of religious societies ought to form themselves, and by which they ought to chuse their companions ----- In general, every thing that constitutes the Christian life, every grace, every disposition, and every duty required of the disciples of Jesus, must be our own study, and the great qualification which recommends our friends to us. An habitual sense of divine truths, spiritual affections, with a heart exercised in faith and godliness, are the things which constitute the new creature, make us fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God, and are therefore things which at once qualify and dispose us to maintain communion

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with saints on earth. Christianity does indeed form a valuable and worthy member of society in general, and is indispensibly necessary to a member of a religious society. I am not to enter into a detail of Christian virtues; I shall confine myself to mention the following Christian excellencies, which are more peculiarly requisite in order to religious fellowship; and which though seldom the attainment, yet are always the endeavour of every worthy member, and one great end of religious intimacies.

1. Such ought to make the knowledge of themselves, and of the scriptures their constant aim. To know ourselves, is an attainment of the greatest importance in itself, as well as a first rate accomplishment to qualify us for society. To get the better of self-conceit and presumption, to attain a just sense of the evil of our ways, the depravity of our natures, the deceitfulness of our hearts, the weakness of our frame, and the danger we are by all these exposed to, will give the soul a noble relish for gospel truths, and makes the scriptures prove a delightful study; the more such an one knows of the truths of God, the more he delights in the sacred theme, and the more he studies it, like the Psalmist, *he communes with his own heart*; like the noble Bereans, Acts xvii. 11. *He searches the scriptures daily*, for he knows, *that in them we have eternal life, for they testify of Christ*, John.v. 39. By such a disposition and exercise, a Christian will be furnished with an inexhaustible fund of the most useful materials for spiritual conference, and the edification of his religious companions.

2. Such knowledge is natively attended with the highest esteem of our God and Saviour, the most fervent desires after his image and favour, and a high delight in every thing that relates to him. And what a noble qualification is such a disposition of mind, for a member of a fellowship meeting! This often makes his tongue as the pen of a ready writer, inditing things concerning the King, and while his own

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soul glows with the sacred ardour, he often like a live coal kindles the heavenly flame in his devout companions.

3. These attainments lead a soul to entertain the great message of the gospel. A soul sensible of the glorious excellencies of our Lord, will be engaged to an habitual application to him, that out of his fulness they may receive, and grace for grace. The blessed effects of this exercise which a Christian's daily experience can record, qualify him happily for the society of sincere Christians. It is a peculiar happiness to a pilgrim to find a companion who knows the way they are to travel. And it must be a peculiar happiness to one travelling towards Zion, to find one who knows the way through Baca's vale, and the method of procuring such refreshment there, as may enable them to go from strength to strength until they arrive before God.

4. To the knowledge and love of sacred things, a worthy member must add an undissembled love, a hearty good will and brotherly affection to our friends and brethren, and such a love to mankind in general, as will engage him to seek the good of all around him. Christianity is properly the religion of love: Love is it's author, for *God is love*; love is it's nature and essence, for *he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him*, 1 John iv. 16. Love is it's great precept, for our Lord says, *This is my commandment, that ye love one another as I have loved you*. And how necessary an excellency is this to society? It is this which lays the foundation of unity and harmony among brethren. It is this which disposes to charity, forgiveness, forbearance, bowels of compassion, and true sympathy towards our brethren. It is this makes us take part in all the cares, fears, griefs, or joye of our friends. It is this which engages to advise, comfort, assist, encourage, and in one word, with cheerfulness, to fulfil all the obligations, and contribute to all the valuable purposes of Christian friendship.

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5. Humilty and lowliness of mind is an excellency of the most essential importance, in order to dispose to religious fellowship. I have already shown the fatal consequences of pride in societies of every kind ; but how inconsistent is it with the principles and obligations of Christianity ? Is it possible one can know his own guilt, depraved, weak, and miserable character, and yet should glory in himself ? Can ore be sensible that all he ever attained or hopes to arrive at, is the gift of free and unmerited goodness, and will he yet boast himself against his fellow ? Can a man call himself a disciple of Jesus, while he is not learning of him who is meek and lowly ? Did the great God and our Saviour, while ministring on earth give us an example, by his bearing with the many follies, infirmities, and faults of his poor disciples ? and will not his followers take the sacred direction, Rom. xii. 16. *Mind not high things, condescend to men of low estate, and be not wise in your own conceits ?* Did he stoop to wash the feet of his disciples, and will any of his followers ever think they can do enough for or bear enough with those that are dear to him ? Finally, can we be sensible of our own infirmities, without sympathizing with others under the like, and contributing our utmost endeavours to remove them ? The apostle's command therefore should have an universal influence, Phil. ii. 3. *Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves.*

6. The genuine fruit of humility is meekness and patience. Passion and resentment are the well known children of pride, these ruinsome plagues of society resemble each other both in their nature and effects. Both of these cloud our reason, make us insensible of duty, and indeed incapable of it. But meekness and patience have opposite natures and opposite effects. These keep the mind calm and sober, and therefore capable of exercising our several faculties in a regular way ; they make us judge of things as they really are, and

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and prevent our being imposed on by the false light by which passion disguises them; and thus they render us capable of a steady discharge of the social duties, in spite of all these incidents which in our imperfect state provoke to anger and strife; they prevent our taking offence at the inadvertencies or imperfections of our companions, and at the same time keep us from giving offence to others. It is thus we must fulfil the great precepts of the apostle, Eph. iv. 2. 3. *With all lowliness, and meekness, with long suffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* And ver. 31, 32. *Let all wrath, and bitterness, and anger, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice. And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you. Let us put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercy, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering, forbearing one another, forgiving one another. If any man have a quarrel against any, even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye; and, above all these things; put on charity, which is the band of perfectness,* Col. iii. 12, 13, 14.

7. To all these we should add an obliging, affable, complaisant and brotherly carriage toward all men, especially our fellows. A cold or indifferent look, or froward and churlish way, is not only unlike, but is really inconsistent with friendship. Such a behaviour always expresses some degree of contempt, and if it does not produce resentment, at least it introduces such coldness as breaks up intimacy; but that easy and brotherly carriage which the scripture prescribes, increases our esteem of each other, whets our desire after society with one another, makes us delight in it, gives weight to each others advice and example, cheers up the mind to activity in social duties; and thus makes every friend fond of his religious companion, and active in imitating him. How frequently and warmly does the scriptures urge this lovely temper of mind, Rom. xii. 10.

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Be kindly affectioned one to another, in brotherly love, in honour preferring one another. Tit. iii. 2. Be gentle, shewing all meekness to all men. 1 Pet. iii. 8. 9. Finally be all of one mind, having compassion one of another; love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous, not rendering railing for railing, but contrariwise blessing. The wisdom that is from above, is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy, James iii. 17.

8. As another qualification for society, we ought to study an open, frank, and chearful way of acting towards all we converse with, whether our religious intimates or others. A dull, melancholy, morose and sullen temper (too often indulged, if not affected, by some professors of religion) makes strangers judge amiss of Christianity itself, as a peevish and discontented principle, discourages many almost Christians, and renders the conversation of religious meetings flat, insipid, and distasteful. To render our conversation truly edifying, it ought to be seasoned with salt, not only as to its matter, but as to its manner, especially when we consider, that our desire after society is always attended with a desire after satisfaction with those we converse with. Thus, a misjudging world seek nothing more in company, than joy and mirth: *They make a feast for laughter, and wine maketh them merry.* Such mirth is soon turned into mourning; such joy is but a false appearance of true gladness. This is only to be found with the disciples of Jesus; none else have right to it. *Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart, Psal. xcvi, 11.* It is in the dwellings of the righteous that the voice of joy and gladness is heard. Their privilege it is to rejoice evermore. And this part they ought to act. True religion not only lays a foundation for chearfulness and serenity of mind, but affords the most excellent subjects to enliven the conversation of Christians, and thereby to communicate joy and gladness of heart to each other. Thus it was with the peaceful meeting

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mentioned Acts ii. 46. 47. *They did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people; and with a view to this chearfulness the apostle giveth the exhortation, Col. iii. 16. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.*

9. To all these we must add the study of prudence and discretion. By this I mean a wise and judicious apprehending the advantages or disadvantages which may follow on events or actions, and thence a becoming care and activity to shun the threatening evils, and obtain the benefits hoped for. This is a virtue, which though difficult to attain, yet is of the greatest necessity to members of religious societies, for two great purposes. 1st In order to regulate our tempers and the frame of our minds, and this not only by restraining these affections and passions which lead to folly, but also by regulating and directing all the faculties and even these excellencies which constitute a valuable member of society; because the greatest virtues, when either carried to excess or unsuitably directed, degenerate into vices; and these, by so much more dangerous, as they are clothed in the habits of religion: for example, how oft has zeal for truth, (whether apprehended, or the real truths, yet not essential to Christianity) by mixing with our own passions, degenerated into schism, superstition, cruelty, and persecution? How oft has humility sunk into credulity and an implicit following of those whose knowledge and judgment we reckon superior to our own? How oft has affability dwindled down into impertinence, and chearfulness into levity and folly? These and innumerable other instances which every one's reflection and experience will readily suggest to them, shews the danger one runs, either by exceeding or giving a wrong turn even to dispositions, otherwise the most valuable, and thereby shews the necessity of prudence, in order to

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prevent such fatal mistakes. *2dly*, This virtue is further necessary, in order to improve our correspondence with each other to our mutual profit: it is this noble virtue which points out the advantages to be obtained, and the best method of obtaining them. This shews the dangers we are exposed to, and shews how to remedy or prevent them. It is this directs a wise man when to speak, and when to be silent; when to shut his eyes to his neighbour's infirmities, and when to admonish him; when to applaud and encourage, and when to advise and direct him. In a word, it is in the exercise of this virtue, that, as our Saviour commands, we are to be *wise as serpents, and harmless as doves*; Matth. x. 16.

10. Prudence will always be attended with a decent modesty and reserve in all we do or say. Forwardness and presumption are the genuine fruits of pride or folly, and their effects in society are always nauseous, if not always fatal. Where therefore we find a man self-confident, pretending to every excellency, and boasting of his own merits; we may reasonably conclude such an one presumptuous, and walking in a path so slippery, as that while he thinketh himself wise he will readily appear to be a fool. Do we find one vain of his profession, ostentatious of his attainments; noisy about what he has done, or is doing, and fond that the world should look at him? We may justly fear his pride, and suspect him to be at once a stranger to modesty and humility. Or, do we find a person always talkative, telling all he sees or hears, divulging even the failings of his friends, or their counsels and secrets? Such an one we should fly, as incapable of society; and if we do not suspect his veracity, at least we must condemn his folly. True modesty is the reverse of all this; always humble, and therefore always reserved; always self-diffident, and therefore always cautious; ever knowing that the *tongue is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison*, and therefore

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fore keeping it in as with a bridle, and setting a watch over his lips that he sin not.

II. Lastly, One properly qualified for religious society, must not only study every grace and excellency of Christianity, and endeavour to grow in every virtue, but ought also uniformly to exercise these by a practice and conversation, becoming the gospel; that is, by a regular discharge of all the duties of devotion, whether in public, in family, or in secret; and by a careful performance of all the relative duties he is bound to, whether as a father, a husband, a child, a relation, a servant or neighbour, &c. A man must appear in a very ridiculous light, who pretends to be qualified as member of a select society, yet knows not how to act in the general society of which all mankind are members; and yet more unaccountable, if, while he does not act a proper part in family society, he should yet think himself qualified to join a chosen number whose work is so important, and their engagements so intimate and tender. But would we approve ourselves as children of God, blameless and harmless, without rebuke; would we shine as lights in a dark place, then whatever our station be, whatever our calling, whatever our relations be, to these we must with diligence and faithfulness attend, as these who are not slothful in business, but fervent in spirit, serving the Lord. Without this, our profession must be ridiculed, and the way of God evil spoken of through our faults.

Every body will think, that such a character as I have described by the above advices, is indeed lovely, and that a society made up of such, would at once be useful and agreeable; but I will be asked, Where are such companions to be had? If none but persons who attain to these excellencies are to be members of society meetings, it is the same thing as if they were absolutely prohibited---In answer to this objection, let it be considered, *1st*, That I am far from asserting that perfection in all those accomplishments and attainments

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attainments is to be required in those we choose as our friends; for if so, we must go out of the world ere we find one: all I assert is, that one qualified for religious society must with sincerity and ardour make these Christian excellencies his aim, his study and endeavour. *2dly.* That one who is a stranger to these virtues is indeed incapable of acting a proper part in any society in life, whether sacred or civil; that these are the things which qualify us for every social engagement which we can reasonably enter into, and are peculiarly requisite in all engagements of a religious kind. *3dly.* That society meetings do in their nature suppose their members weak, frail and corrupt creatures, and one grand design of their meetings is to form and improve one another in all these endowments and dispositions which may render them useful and agreeable to each other, and may qualify them for acting well in every capacity, whether as men or as Christians. From all which we may conclude, that if we ourselves are honestly studying these attainments, if we make it our business to improve in them, we will certainly find such an exercise prove an effectual attractive, engaging the affections of all who are of a like temper, and have the same attainments in view: and in like manner, where we find persons professing a desire and endeavour after the virtues and excellencies of Christianity, we are in the judgment of charity to regard such as brethren, to receive such into our intimacy, and treat them as friends and companions, while we find nothing which may give reason to judge that their profession has been insincere. Nor must we think ourselves absolved from the obligations of friendship, even though we discover various weaknesses, and even frequent failings in smaller matters, so long as we can in charity think our companion sincere in his profession; on the contrary, we ought to mind the apostolic precept, 2 Thess. v. 14. *Comfort the feeble minded, and support the weak.*

Though society meetings are really calculated for forming and improving the endowments and dispositions

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ons which become Christians, yet we oft come to lose the end by misapplying the means; and breaches in charity, humility, moderation, &c. are often complained of from these very societies which are designed to cultivate and improve these excellencies. It is therefore necessary to condescend in as particular a manner as may be, on such rules as may most effectually prevent the evils complained of, and may direct to the useful and valuable purposes of such societies. This leads me,

Secondly, To mention such rules as relate to the exercise of religious companions in their fellowship meetings.-----Every society has an undoubted right to prescribe rules to their own members: and I would not be understood as precluding any of that privilege by blaming, far less condemning those who should form to themselves rules different from those I offer, or perhaps in some instances of less moment, even contrary to them: but whatever rules are agreed on by the society, I would advise, that a fair copy of them should be wrote out: that every member should promise obedience to them, or subscribe them, as the society shall appoint; that they should be read over in meeting at stated times, and upon the admission of every new member: and that they should ever lie by the meeting, to be referred to as circumstances require.-----As I apprehend that the following rules, if duly attended to, would prevent most of the evils complained of or feared, and at the same time help to attain the real purposes of society meetings, I shall therefore give them in the form, in which I would advise members to subscribe or promise obedience to them; only I shall add some explications, to show the nature or necessity of some of them.-----I humbly propose that the regulations for society meetings might be stated as follows.

- " That the valuable and important ends of religious
- " fellowship may be more effectually obtained,
- " we under-subscribers having formed ourselves
- " into a society meeting, do unanimously oblige
- " ourselves

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“ ourselves to the strict observation of the following rules; and, through divine grace, we resolve on the discharge of the following duties.”

I. “ That we shall meet together, weekly, on such days, and at such houses, as the society shall fix on, and shall not absent ourselves from these meetings without necessary cause, of which our fellows shall judge the relevancy, and appoint the censure.” It has often happened, that after persons have formed themselves into such societies, without regarding their attendance as a matter of duty, that every one thinks every trivial business which comes in his way a sufficient reason for his absence; and thus such societies have in a little time dwindled altogether away. Every member should therefore regard his attendance, not as a matter of indifference, but of importance and conscience, and not to be dispensed with, unless where duties or events of greater importance, or at least of more pressing necessity intervene. To this we are obliged, Heb. x. 24, 25. *Let us consider one another to provoke unto love, and to good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as ye see the day approaching.*

II. “ In our meetings we shall carefully shun all idle and trifling conversation: we shall, as commanded, Tit. iii. 9.-----*Avoid foolish questions and genealogies, and contentions and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain.*” We shall as required, 1 Tim. iv. 7. *Refuse profane and old wives fables and exercise ourselves rather unto godliness.*

III. “ One of our number shall always open the meeting, by singing a part of a Psalm, reading a portion of the scriptures, and praying; which duties and others proper to the meeting, we all engage

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“ gage to perform in our several turns, without reluctance or backwardness.”-----

IV. “ In prayer, every one shall be confined to the proper work; that is, not praying as if one was preaching, nor introducing unnecessary, injurious, or uncharitable reflections on public matters, or on the conduct and character of persons who are not of our society; but we shall confine ourselves to invocation, adoration, confession, petition, and thanksgiving.”---The neglect of this rule will be attended with many dreadful consequences, condescended on under rules 11th and 12th

V. “ Besides these matters of petition, which immediately relate to ourselves, whether as a society or as singulars, we shall, through grace, wrestle with God for days of refreshing, and for reviving his own work in the midst of the years: we shall endeavour to plead with God, that he would give his ministers a double portion of his spirit; that he would strengthen what he has wrought for any corner of his vineyard, or for any who have felt his convincing power, and would make conversion work to become even universal; and we shall study to have in particular remembrance the interest of religion in the congregations whereof we are members, and the earthen vessel among us to which the great and sacred treasure is committed.”-----Isa. lxii. 6, 7.---*Ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence, and give him no rest till he establish and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth*

VI. “ As prayer and praise are essential parts of the exercise of religious societies, we shall therefore take care that the time of our meetings be as equally divided betwixt these and Christian conference as may be, or so that the one may not preclude the other.”

VII. “ The person who first officiates in the above-named duties, shall, in opening our conference, ask first, Whether any of our members have any question

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tion to propose about which their souls have been,
 " or are specially exercised ? Or if there be any thing
 " in the state of their mind about which they want
 " the opinion or advice of the meeting ? If none of-
 " fer, he shall next enquire, Whether any thing has
 " cast up to any of the members in the course of their
 " experiences, or of God's providence toward them,
 " which may be either edifying, confirming, or com-
 " forting, or which may afford matter for praise, or
 " may require our mutual sympathy in prayer ? If
 " nothing of this nature offer, he shall next enquire,
 " If any of the society have any question or case to
 " propose, about which they desire to have the judg-
 " ment of the meeting ?"-----After mentioning this
 rule, I think it necessary to add somewhat more par-
 ticularly relating to this part of the exercise of society
 meetings.-----A great many ministers and judicious
 Christians have declared themselves against this prac-
 tice of communicating experiences, as a thing which
 tends to nourish spiritual pride in some, tempts others
 to hypocrisy and affectation, discourages Christians of
 lesser abilities and lower attainments; and in general
 leads to enthusiasm.-----But I apprehend, that those
 consequences proceed rather from the manner in which
 experiences are communicated in some societies, than
 from the practice itself: For, *First*, Some experien-
 ces are in themselves confirming evidences of the truth
 of Christianity in general, and of practical godliness
 in particular; such as remarkable returns of prayer,
 signal deliverances from temptations, afflictions, or
 dangers of any kind, special benefits obtained in the
 use of ordinances, &c. To communicate experiences
 of these kinds to our Christian intimates, must be al-
 lowed to be highly reasonable and proper, if we
 would not condemn the opinion and practice of the
 inspired Psalmist, who, Psal. lxxvi. 16. calls all who
 fear God to come and hear him declare what God
 had done for his soul. *Secondly*, Some experiences,
 especially some which relate to his most inmost exer-
 cises,

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cises are of such a kind as give him great anxiety, yet leave him very much in the dark what to think of them, or how to be exercised under them. Nay, there is no doubt but sometimes the most knowing and most experienced Christians may be under influences really enthusiastic or delusive. (Vide Psal. lxxvii. 6. -----10.) To mention those or like secrets of one's heart in open meetings, is no doubt highly imprudent; as what exposes to the censure of some, and to the indiscretion of others, who perhaps may make a very bad use of what is communicated to them: or, to require every member in their turns, to communicate what they have felt or known of the same or like nature, is certainly altogether unreasonable, and does indeed introduce all the evils apprehended or complained of: but if, instead of these irregular ways, it be left to every one's self to propose whatever he wants the opinion of the society about as a possible case, by asking what advice they would give in such a case, and at the same time to leave it to the members to speak on the subject, or be silent as each inclines: such a method would effectually prevent all the evils complained of or feared.-----To all this I must add, *Thirdly*, That if this method is not allowed some of the most important purposes of religious fellowship must be lost. Can we comfort the feeble minded, and support the weak? Can we edify and provoke one another to love and to good works? Can we assist and strengthen one another against the failings, mistakes and errors we are naturally liable to? Or can we encourage one another in the ways of religion, and yet be utterly unacquainted with the state of each others souls, or denied the privilege and opportunity of supposing such cases, and asking such questions as may give some insinuation of the state of our minds, or at least may procure the advice and opinion of our brethren a-nent these?

VIII. " These questions about which any members of the society have been or are exercised, or such

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“ such questions as any member desires, the meeting
 “ may give their opinion or advice in, shall be first
 “ taken under consideration : but if any person shall
 “ under this pretence, introduce any question, either
 “ trifling, or matter of mere curiosity, or engendering
 “ strife, or of doubtful disputation, such questions
 “ shall be rejected, and the person who proposed
 “ such, shall be subject to the censure of the meet-
 “ ing.”

IX. “ If no such questions (as these directed to)
 “ shall offer, or after they have been discussed, then
 “ the person who last officiated in worship, shall pro-
 “ pose some useful and edifying question relating to
 “ the substantials of religion or practical godliness, to
 “ which all the members present shall give such an-
 “ swers as occur to them in their several turns; and
 “ this with all possible brevity and distinctness, with-
 “ out repeating what others have said, but assenting
 “ to it, or adding to it, or objecting against it in the
 “ spirit of meekness.”-----What is directed to in
 this rule seems to be the most proper exercise during
 the intervals of worship, where the members are well
 acquainted with the truths and principles of Christi-
 anity : but, as one great purpose of society meetings is
 improvement in knowledge, I therefore advise, that
 where the members have not attained to a clear and
 distinct knowledge of the doctrines of our holy faith,
 that at least some share of the time proposed for con-
 versation should be employed in order to attain this
 important purpose : and, for this end, I propose, that
 every meeting should be provided with Mr. Vincent’s
 or Mr. Willison’s explications of the Shorter Cate-
 chism; that one of the members should ask one of
 the explicatory questions, but without reading the
 answer in the book, until all the members have given
 such answers as occur to them, then read the answer
 in the book, and compare it with the answers given
 by the members; and thus in course, one asking
 while all the rest of the society give their opinions.

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This method I have in frequent instances known, surprisingly effectual in promoting knowledge; it is even more beneficial than if every member should in private get the whole book by heart; for, though by this method they have not these questions and answers by rote, yet by it they come to understand them more clearly, to retain them better, and to be more affected by them.

X. "No question shall in any case be admitted as a topic of our conversation, which implies in it a daring or overcurious prying into the mysteries of revelation, such as the doctrines of the Trinity, of the incarnation of our Lord, the decrees of God, &c. or these passages of scripture which are more mysterious and hard to be understood, knowing that *no prophecy of the scriptures is of private interpretation*, 2 Pet. i. 20. And that in the scriptures there are *some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest---unto their own destruction*," 2 Pet. iii. 16

XI. "We shall with the utmost care keep at a distance from every subject of conversation, which is matter of doubtful disputation, about which the scriptures are not express, or about which ministers and Christians in all ages have differed; in a word, all matters of controversy, whether the controversies of the day or of past ages, however public they be, or however important they may seem; lest *swerving from charity, we turn aside unto vain janglings, desiring to be teachers of the law, yet understanding neither what we say, nor whereof we affirm*," 1 Tim. i. 6, 7.

XII. "We shall in like manner carefully shun all conversation on such matters, as the members of the society have no immediate concern with. Such as, the public administration in church and state, the conduct and practice of ministers, whether in their public or private capacities, the character and behaviour of all persons whatsoever, who are not members

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“ of our meeting, and in general, every thing which
 “ may produce heat and disputing, or may prevent
 “ the real purposes of our meeting.”-----The two
 last named rules will perhaps be thought by some, to be
 by far too rigid. But it must be observed, that the
 neglect of these rules has in reality occasioned all the
 evils which have been complained of from society
 meetings, and will readily produce all the ills that are
 feared from them; and this the rather, that these a-
 bove named subjects of conversation, by being the
 common topics in promiscuous companies, do more
 readily become the subjects of debate in society meet-
 ings. But wherever they find admittance, they never
 fail of introducing troublesome, yea ruinous conse-
 quences. They divert from the proper exercise of
 such meetings; blind zeal, contention and wrath, con-
 stantly attend them, and at once subvert the purposes
 of fellowship meetings, and even render them semina-
 ries of discord and schism in the country where they
 reside. Notwithstanding all this, I am sensible some
 objections will be made against these regulations, and
 something plausible will perhaps be offered, if not to
 over-rule, at least to elude them. As 1st, Some per-
 haps will ask, Are there not some controversies im-
 portant and interesting in themselves, or which appear
 so to a serious Christian, as lays him under a necessity
 in point of conscience to be satisfied in these matters?
 And to whom can he so properly apply, as to his re-
 ligious intimates? But I would have the objector to
 observe, that if our doubts and difficulties relate to
 the essentials of religion, on which our faith and prac-
 tice must turn, we have the scriptures, we have our
 standards, and we have our ministers to whom we
 may apply, and from whom we may reasonably expect
 a solid and satisfying solution; but to carry such dis-
 putes among a number of unlearned men who have
 never been conversant in controversies, is an infallible
 method of perplexing them and ourselves, and instead
 of removing one doubt, will rather raise a thousand.

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If on the other hand, it is a controversy about which the scriptures are not express, and in which ministers differ in their opinion, the danger of canvassing such in our meetings appears still to be the greater. To be silent on such dubious matters cannot be loss, to broach them in our societies may prove irreparable ruin. 2dly, Some will probably ask, Whether are not members of fellowship meetings bound to take all possible methods, for obtaining a general reformation of manners? And must it not therefore be proper for them, to search out iniquity, and consult together on the proper methods for putting a stop to it? To this I answer, that no doubt, every Christian is bound to make reformation of manners his endeavour, and to take all proper methods for that noble purpose. But for a society meeting to set up for censors on the conduct and manners of persons, who are not members of the society, is both dangerous in itself, and inconsistent with the intent of their fellowship. Their endeavours after public reformation must be confined to their prayers and good example; whatever influence or opportunity any particular member may have in his private capacity for reclaiming particular offenders, that they are bound to use with all possible zeal and activity; but that they ought by no means to bring the case, their views, their endeavours, or even their success this way to be canvassed in their meetings. If otherways, the reformation of others will cut out the more important subjects, on which their own personal improvement in grace and virtue depends, and will at the same time render the whole fraternity contemptible and odious to all around them. What is here said, can no ways be considered as condemning these societies which consist of persons duly qualified and authorised, for attempting a reformation of manners; because this sort of societies differ widely in the design, and therefore in the manner of their associations, from these I speak to. 3dly, Some will perhaps object, that some of these subjects represented as unsuitable

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suitable, and to be prohibited as matters of conversation in religious societies, may in some cases become matters of conscience. May not such steps, say they, be taken by church judicatories, as are matters of humiliation before God? May not a person be under mistakes, and need reformation in such cases? And to whom can he more properly apply in such events, than to his religious intimates? I answer, that as we have many and more effectual means of procuring information in these matters, it must be both improper and dangerous, to bring the conduct of judicatories before a society meeting. Whatever our own private opinions be of these matters, it is quite inconsistent with the nature and purposes of religious fellowship, to bring our mother church to the bar, and presume to censure the conduct of a body of men, of whose grace and prudence we ought to think at least with charity and modesty. And the danger is evident, when persons come to make their own judgement the standard, to which the whole church must conform, or be censured as enemies to God, seperated from as unclean; it is impossible to know to what extremities they must carry things. When zeal is not regulated by knowledge, error, schism, unchristian resentments, and all the dreadful plagues of society soon creep in under that specious veil.-----In fact, we have too many instances which our own memories can record, where private societies by mistaking or misconstruing the proceedings of judicatories, have wofully injured the interests of religion, and broken the peace of congregations. The only part therefore which such societies as we speak of ought to act with regard to public matters, is that of prayer to God, for the special direction of his Holy Spirit, to those who have the administration in their hands. If more is admitted, it is to be feared the design of their meetings will be lost, and such a society even prove a curse to the place where they live.-----A 4th Objection will probably be made against these rules, viz. That ministers

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sters may act such a part, as may render our communion with them unwarrantable, and that in such a case we ought to apply to our Christian brethren for advice. To this I answer, that this way of doing, is a most effectual tool in Satan's hand, for cooling that affection we ought to bear to those who labour in word and doctrine among us, but is absolutely contrary to the method the scripture directs to in such cases, Mat. xviii. 15, 16, 17. *If our brother offend us, far more requisite if it is our minister, first tell it between him and thee.* If he satisfies us about what we blamed or suspected in his conduct, what a dreadful iniquity do we escape, which we must have committed, had we communicated our reflections to any person or society whatever? or if our modest representation makes him act another, and a better part, what a noble end have we gained without giving that offence which must attend the communicating our complaint to others? If this has not the wished for effect, we are next commanded to take one or two with us before whom we are to make our complaint. If we still fail of success, we are then, and not till then, to tell it to the elders of the church, (*viz.* the Presbytery,) and if that authority does not prevail with him, *Let him then be unto us as a heathen man and a publican.*-----On the whole, we can be at no loss by abstaining from such dangerous or criminal topics of conversation. Christianity is an inexhaustible fund, and abounds in the most agreeable and edifying subjects; the study of the scriptures will ever afford us both new and useful matter of conference. As a specimen of the many noble questions the sacred oracles suggest, and as a help to such societies when but forming, or when the members cannot afford variety for themselves, I shall subjoin as an appendix to this discourse, some questions from scripture texts, which I take to be proper subjects for the conversation in society meetings.

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XIII. " If any question or case be proposed about
 " which the society differ in their sentiments, or in
 " which they cannot resolve themselves; the meeting
 " shall, in such a case, appoint one of their number,
 " or more as they see fit, who shall ask the opi-
 " nion of the minister of the parish. This, not only
 " because a satisfying answer may reasonably be ex-
 " pected from such; but also, as an acknowledging of
 " such as are over us in the Lord, and admonish us,"
 1 Thess. v. 12, 13.

XIV. " Every member shall both in prayer and con-
 " ference, study all clearness, plainness, brevity, and
 " scripture-style, as far as can be attained by us; and
 " shall carefully evite every word or expression, which
 " we do not understand, even though such be scriptur-
 " al."

XV. " No doubt their may be escapes in the ex-
 " pressions of members, both in prayer and in confe-
 " rence; we shall therefore beware of judging rashly,
 " or censuring each other hastily. But if any mem-
 " ber shall use expressions which are either unintelli-
 " gible, or favouring of error, or such as any of the
 " meeting scruple to join in, he shall then be asked to
 " explain such, or in the spirit of meekness desired to
 " forbear such."

XVI. " We shall carefully shun every thing favour-
 " ing of ostentation or vain glory, not diminishing o-
 " thers, nor magnifying ourselves, not assuming any
 " superiority to ourselves, whatever our station or abi-
 " lities are, not speaking in a positive and dictatorial
 " manner, nor undervaluing what is said by others
 " That no man think of himself more highly than he ought
 " to think, but think soberly, according as God hath dealt
 " to every man the measure of faith. Rom xii. 3. That
 " nothing be done through strife or vain glory, but in low-
 " liness of mind, let each esteem others better than them-
 " selves." Phil. ii. 3.

XVII. " In reasoning upon any subject which cast
 " up in our conferences, we shall each of us with care
 " and

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“ and watchfulness endeavour to repress the vehemence
 “ and impetuosity of his own spirit, that though like
 “ Elihu, Job xxxii 18. full of matter, and the spirit
 “ within us constraining us, yet we shall not presume
 “ to interrupt others when speaking, or to speak but in
 “ our due course, *that all things may be done decently and*
 “ *in order,*” 1 Cor. xiv. 40.

XVIII. “ We shall in like manner in all our reason-
 “ ings, guard with the utmost caution against heat, anger,
 “ or contention, and every expression, which either fa-
 “ vour of these, or lead to them. We shall carefully avoid
 “ stiffness or positiveness in our opinions, and sharp or
 “ virulent expressions, or reflections on the sentiments
 “ of others who differ from us. We shall on the contrary
 “ endeavour as commanded, Jam. i. 18, 19. *Be swift*
 “ *to hear, and slow to speak, and slow to wrath, for the*
 “ *wrath of man, worketh not the righteousness of God.*”

XIX. “ If at any time, heats or passions be like to
 “ arise among the members, whatever be the subject of
 “ debate, then he who last officiated in worship shall
 “ interpose, by desiring him whose turn it is, to pray.
 “ And this shall be looked on by all parties as a drop-
 “ ping of the question, at least for that meeting; for af-
 “ ter prayer it shall not be allowable to resume the dis-
 “ pute.”

XX. “ We all resolve through grace to study a con-
 “ versation in all things becoming the gospel, and we
 “ firmly resolve, that no person of a scandalous charac-
 “ ter, or of a lewd and disorderly deportment, or of vi-
 “ cious principles, or immoral practices, shall be admit-
 “ ted as a member of our society, whatever his station
 “ be, whatever his profession, or how pregnant soever
 “ his parts be,” 2 Cor. v. 11.

XXI. “ In like manner we firmly resolve to shun all
 “ divisive and schismatic courses, and every thing tend-
 “ ing to these, and shall in no case abett or encourage
 “ these, or the persons who adhere to them, nor shall
 “ we admit such into societies with us.”—Some people
 will perhaps think this rule hard, or even uncharitable
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XXII.
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and cruel. But I would have these persons to observe, 1st, That when people have seperated themselves from the communion of the church, purely on account of some controverted articles, it will be difficult, not to say impossible, to keep them from introducing these points as topics of conversation in their society meetings. What heats, contentions, and terrible consequences may arise from this, is too plain to need repeating. And 2^{dly}, That a diversity of opinions among the members of the society, natively introduces different, yea inconsistent petitions in prayer, a consequence dreadfully shocking as well as hurtful. I actually knew a fellowship meeting, one of whose members of late was a seceder, while the other members in prayer blessed God for any measures of grace and divine influences displayed in some corners of his vineyard; and prayed that the good work might be established and might spread universally; he on the contrary mourned that God had given up the church of Scotland to a spirit of delusion, and prayed that God would put a stop to the work as being of Satanical influence. Other instances of the same kind I have heard of; but as I believe most peoples experience affords melancholy instances of the shocking consequences proceeding from a diversity of principles and views among the members of the same society, what is said will be sufficient to show the necessity of this rule how ever harsh or uncharitable it may at first view appear to be.

XXII. " If any of our number be convicted of a fault grossly scandalous, such a person shall not presume to claim their seat in our meeting; and the society shall formally declare such a person to be no more a member. If the fault is not grossly scandalous, yet such as give offence and may cause our way to be evil spoken of, then we shall endeavour, as those who are spiritual, to restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering ourselves lest we also be tempted,"

Gal. vi. 1.

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XXIII " For this purpose, the meeting shall first
 " appoint one of their number privately to admonish
 " the offending brother: If this has not the desired
 " effect, if he takes not with the admonition or con-
 " tinues in his offensive practice, the society shall next
 " appoint one of their number to rebuke him in pre-
 " sence of the meeting, and if he acquiesces not in the
 " censure of the society, let him then be expelled as
 " one who is destitute of a quiet and meek spirit." --In
 all that relates to censures and admonition, much is to
 be left to the judgment and discretion of societies. It
 is evident that mutual admonition is one great and va-
 luable end of religious intimacies; but it is as certain,
 that many gross abuses have crept into society under
 that specious pretext. Under this pretence some cu-
 riously pry into their neighbours failings, or maliciously
 entertain secret slanders and calumnious whispers; and
 by such methods they both vex and affront their bre-
 thren, directly opposite to the great rule of charity,
 which *thinketh no evil, and covereth a multitude of sins.*
 A true friend chooseth to draw a veil over the failings
 of his companions: he would even wish these to be
 unknown to himself, as well as concealed from the eyes
 of the world. But when he knows them, he first en-
 deavours with tenderness and love to admonish, in or-
 der to reclaim him; and if his own influence fails, then
 that of the society, as of a number of intimate friends,
 is to be interposed. But still their proceedings and
 censures should be like these of brethren; that is, *if*
 preceded by an impartial, or rather, a friendly inquiry,
 into the nature, manner, and circumstances of the
 fault: Whether it be an open scandal, or a secret folly?
 Whether atrocious in its nature, and fatal in its con-
 sequences? Whether committed through weakness,
 or heat of passion, or if done deliberately? Whether
 the person be habitually subject to that or to like
 failings: or if the fault be only in a single instance;
 and whether there be not some circumstances which
 diminish the offence: To these enquiries we ought to

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add, *2dly*, An inquiry into the character the person formerly bore, and the sense he now has of his fault. If he is indeed contrite, our censure is to be turned into consolation; if otherways, we are to endeavour to bring him to a sense of his error, by reason and argument. In all this, *3dly*, We must take care that our resentment at the fault, does not introduce a dislike to the person, but that on the contrary, we still maintain that love and charity, which is essential to Christian friendship, which distinguishes betwixt a person and his faults; and which instead of rejoicing in the failings of our neighbour, makes us mourn for his iniquities as for our own, and pity, and pray for him under his infirmities. Minds thus disposed, will *4thly*, Admonish and reprove in the spirit of meekness and charity, not with an haughty air, nor with an affected superiority; not with sharp and angry words, railing, or reviling, which commonly makes the offender hate the reproof, and him that gives it, and instead of reproving offences, produces bitterness and strife, and with friendly sympathy, and with words intimating that love, which ought to be at once the motive and director of every admonition.---*5thly*, In all censures, we must have a tender regard to the credit, and character of our brother. While we heal a wound, we must take care that we leave not a scar. And while we endeavour to turn our brother from his follies, we must also beware that we leave not a stain on his character, if it can possibly be prevented.

XXIV. " For encouraging such brotherly censures
" and admonitions, we all resolve and promise through
" grace, to submit ourselves in love, and in the spirit
" of meekness, to the judgment, advice, and censure of
" the society, in all things pertaining thereto, P^{sa}. cxli. 5.
" *Let the righteous smite me, it shall be a kindness, and let*
" *him reprove me, it shall be an excellent oil, which shall*
" *not break my head.*"

XXV. " We ourselves hereby do, and all who may
" hereafter join us, shall come under the strong-

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“ est engagements and promises, that we shall not in any case, directly or indirectly, divulge any thing which may any way be to the prejudice of the society, or any of the members of it; nay that we shall not even mention these things which are useful or agreeable, as coming from the meeting, unless it be by the appointment of the meeting, or with their allowance; nor shall we even then, condescend on persons, or their particular opinions. Whoever transgresseth this rule, shall for the first fault be sharply rebuked, by one appointed by the meeting for this purpose, and in case of a second fault, shall be expelled our society.”

XXVI. “ No person shall be urged to join our meeting, nor shall any person be invited, without the unanimous consent of all the members. And at the admission of every member, the rules of the society shall be read to them, to which they shall promise obedience, or shall subscribe them, as the society shall appoint.”

XXVII. “ Any persons who incline to join our meeting, shall first desire one of our number to propose this to the society, where, after due deliberation, the question shall be put to the vote, and the majority of voices shall determine, if, or not, the person shall be admitted. No person shall presume to bring any one along with him, until after the mind of the society is thus known.”

XXVIII. “ But that Christian fellowship may be more accessible, and our society more generally useful, if any person desire to join with us who is otherways qualified, but bashful, and loath to speak or pray before company through over modesty, the society shall as they see proper, allow such an one to be present for five, at most six times of meeting, without desiring him to officiate, yet so, as he shall be bound to all the other rules of the society.”

XXIX. “ If any difference or quarrel shall at any time arise betwixt any of our members, we shall
“ take

of Religious Fellowship. 85

“ take the most prudent, and most effectual methods
 “ we can, in order to reconcile them, by enquiring in-
 “ to the grounds of their dispute, hearing the parties,
 “ and giving such advice and admonition, as may re-
 “ move the difference, and reconcile the parties to each
 “ other; according to the apostle’s command,” 1 Cor.
 vi. 1,---8.

XXX. “ If any of the contending parties shall re-
 “ fuse to be reconciled to his brother, if he discovers
 “ any ill will to him, or be known to entertain anger,
 “ malice, spite, or sentiments of revenge against any
 “ person whatever, such an one shall be looked on as
 “ a spot in our feasts of charity, and shall not be al-
 “ lowed to join with us, until he acknowledge his fault,
 “ and show that he is come to a better temper of
 “ mind.”

XXXI. “ We shall take all possible care to prevent
 “ disorder and confusion, and every thing which may
 “ occasion these; and lest a too great number of
 “ members should introduce these, if our society grow
 “ numerous, we shall, as circumstances require, form
 “ ourselves into two separate societies, by common
 “ consent. And to prevent any disputes which may
 “ arise in doing this, we shall either allow the mem-
 “ bers at whose houses the respective societies are to
 “ meet, to make their alternate choices of all the
 “ members, or we shall divide the bounds in which
 “ our members reside, and class these together who
 “ live in nearest neighbourhood.”---If but two or three
 are met together, they have the promise of our Lord’s
 presence and blessing, and perhaps such companions
 do enjoy each other in the most intimate and particu-
 lar manner when their number is small; five has been
 generally thought a convenient number for maintain-
 ing or animating a conversation, and I should think ten
 the most that a fellowship meeting should consist
 of.

XXXII “ Our dividing our meeting shall make
 “ no alteration in our religious friendships; we shall
 “ through

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“ through grace, endeavour to retain the same affection and sympathy, and to discharge the same brotherly duties to each other as ever. And as a help to this, we shall keep a regular correspondence with each other, (and with any other society meeting in our neighbourhood, if they shall agree to it) by appointing one or two of our number to join these meetings by turns, that thus, knowing each others condition, we may sympathize with, and pray for one another. And that if any thing occur, in which the advice, or consent of the several societies is requisite, or any thing which may prove edifying or instructing, it may be communicated to each society by such correspondents.”

XXXIII. “ With the consent of these other meetings with whom correspondence is kept, general meetings may be appointed as circumstances require, and by these, days may be set apart for prayer and fasting, but these only for the members of the several societies, and that only, when some peculiar providences require it.”

XXXIV. “ If any Christians in our neighbourhood incline to form themselves into a fellowship meeting and desire our advice or assistance; or, if any societies of the younger sort, whose youth, or want of knowledge and experience exposes them to the danger of mismanagements, be near us, we shall cheerfully give them all the help we can, by appointing one or more of our number to join them, keeping correspondence with them, or otherwise aiding them, as providence gives opportunity or ability.”

XXXV. “ Though it is highly proper, that women, as well as men, should form themselves into such religious engagements; yet decency, order, and the disproportion betwixt the stronger and weaker vessels make us resolve, that our meeting shall in no case be promiscuous.”

XXXVI.

of Religious Fellowship. 87

XXXVI. " If, upon a Sabbath day, the congregation is vacant, such members as are not from home at public worship shall meet together for spiritual exercises; and this besides the usual meetings on week days."

XXXVII. " We shall attend the meetings of our society in the most cautious and least noisy way possible. We shall shun all ostentation in coming to them or going from them; and shall not boast of our fellowship and profession, that thus our meetings may resemble the exercises of the closet, known only to our Father in heaven."

XXXVIII. " That our rules may more effectually take place, we shall cause them to be read over in our meeting once each month (at least once each quarter) as also at every time when any member is admitted. And every member shall be allowed copies of them, if they desire it."

XXXIX. " For this purpose also it is judged proper, that the person who last officiated in worship should preside in our conversation in the intervals; that is, That he should state the questions proposed; should sum up the sentiments of the meeting upon any subject, after every one has given his opinion of it; should call the votes of the society; should pronounce censures; should interpose to prevent too much speaking or repetitions, and to repress heat or passion in any of the members; should ask questions from such books as the society chuses, and after the members have given their opinions, should compare them with the answers in the book; and, in a word, should act in the name, and as the mouth of the whole society, in all matters which may cast up during the intervals fore said. In all these things he shall be submitted to by all the members in the spirit of meekness; but this his office shall subsist no longer than until another has prayed, who shall then officiate as above directed."

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XL. Finally, " We having formed ourselves into
 " a society for prayer and spiritual conference, and
 " having unanimously agreed upon the above rules,
 " we do, through divine grace, promise and resolve to
 " obey them, and subject ourselves to them in all
 " points, and oblige ourselves, that we shall in no case
 " infringe them, or dispense with any one of them, un-
 " less the whole of our members, and the societies
 " with which we correspond, and the minister of the
 " parish in which we reside, shall advise or consent
 " thereto."-----This rule will perhaps appear
 too rigid at first view, but it must be considered, that if
 societies do not pay a strict regard to their rules, it
 will be impossible to prevent the bad consequences com-
 plained of or feared, and as impossible to procure the
 valuable purposes intended by them. And if this rule
 is not regarded, societies will soon make havoc of all their
 regulations; and the dispensing with one rule will
 become a precedent for dispensing with any or all of
 them.

Thus I have laid down the rules by which I hum-
 bly propose religious companions should act in their
 fellowship meetings. It is probable that many persons
 of knowledge and experience will think some of these
 rules unnecessary or even trifling: and, indeed it is
 true, that some of them will be of very little use to
 societies of long standing, or whose members have
 attained to real prudence; but, it must be remembered
 I write this for the benefit of persons who have not at-
 tained so much, and of those who are but forming
 themselves into such societies; and for such, I am per-
 suaded, they will all appear reasonable, if not necessa-
 ry.

But the support of religious societies does not de-
 pend on the character of the members, and their con-
 duct in their meetings only; it is further requisite,
 that they act such a part to each other in civil life, as
 may cement their friendships, and may increase their
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mutual good will to each other. this leads me to the third thing I proposed, *viz.*

III. To offer some advices to members of religious societies, relating to their conduct towards each other in the commerce of the world.

As fellowship of this kind ought to be founded on esteem and affection, as these engagements imply the most sacred intimacies, so the most sincere and thorough friendship is necessary to support them. And therefore.

1. Members of religious societies ought as brethren to bear with one anothers infirmities and frequent failings. When we examine our own hearts, alas! what a vast number of wrongs and wants appear? We may say in the stile of the Psalmist, *Innumerable evils compass me about*, Psal. xl. 12. And if each of these be sustained by our friends as grounds of aversion and disregard, friendship, nay society itself must soon end. If we are conscious of our own failings, we wish that our friends would pity us, would draw a veil over our faults, and aid us in correcting them: and should we not judge in the same manner with regard to others as we would have them do in our behalf? We ought to remember that the spirits of different men are like their bodily constitutions, subject to different maladies and distempers. Should we then suppose a number of diseased persons in an infirmary, one afflicted with a gout, another with a gravel, some complaining of sickness, and others of pain, &c. if, instead of pitying and aiding each other, they should make their difference of ailments a ground of disputing and quarrelling, how madly ridiculous would such a contest appear? And if in like manner in a society of Christians, one is naturally passionate, and another positive, some of quick and ready faculties, and others whose talents are fewer and weaker; one subject to one prevailing plague of heart, and another to infirmities of a different or opposite kind, does not this call for the same sympathy, as every one, especially sick persons,

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ought to exercise with each other? Or if, instead of this, it excites contention and hate, is it not as ridiculous as in the case just now mentioned? When therefore we think on the infirmities and faults of our brother, let us regard them as diseases he is subject to; let us not suffer this to lessen our esteem or affection for him; let us on the contrary enquire how we may remove or correct the evils he labours under; and with prudence and activity let us endeavour to remedy them.

2. In order to maintain mutual friendship, we must beware of taking the expressions or actions of our companions in bad part, or by a wrong handle. This is perhaps one of the most necessary rules, in order to preserve the peace of societies of whatever kind, and to prevent these breaches which often overturn the most intimate and sacred engagements. We often find the most inveterate enmities arising from no greater cause than a misunderstood expression, or a misconstrued action, or, at most, from some slight indiscretion in people's language or behaviour. Such trifling events first produce coldness, and chagrin their resentment; which soon grows up to hatred and enmity.-----Behold what a great fire a small spark kindles?-----How necessary then to smother it while but weak? To this purpose, if our companion happens to say any thing which we think reflects on us, or which we apprehend to be ill natured, unmannerly or satyrical, we must not instantly condemn him; we ought first with charity and tenderness to examine whether the expression be capable of another and better meaning; whether it be spoke in good humour, with a view to divert and not to injure; and whether it may not proceed from some mis-information or mis-construction.-----In like manner, we must not rashly condemn those actions, which, at first view, we apprehend to be unfriendly, or even unjust.-----It is the extreme of presumption, to conclude that our first apprehensions of things are infallibly true.-----

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Humility, charity, and prudence, forbid this, and require us to examine whether there be not something in the nature, manner, motives and views of the action, which at least extenuate, if they do not altogether vindicate the conduct of our friend: and if an expression be capable of a good and agreeable meaning; if an action can be conceived of in a favourable light, in those views we are bound to regard them.

-----Or if the expressions or actions of our brother are such, as we can neither soften nor vindicate, we must then, with meekness, inform our offending friend of what we think has injured us: if he has the dispositions that become a friend, he will either satisfy us of his conduct, or acknowledge his fault (which obliges us to forgive him:) or if he want these dispositions, we sustain no loss by giving up correspondence with him: but along with this, we must give up resentment also; -----*Charity suffereth long and is kind -----is not easily provoked-----thinketh no evil-----bear-eth all things-----endureth all things,* 1 Cor. xiii. 4, 5, 7.

3. As brethren we must sympathize with each other in the several events which providence may dispense to any of us: could we come to conceive of our relations to each other, in the way in which the scriptures represent them, we would then find the sympathy I speak of, becoming as natural to us. No man ever yet hated his own flesh; but when one member is in pain, all the rest will suffer, at least it must be a rotten member that is not affected with the agonies of it's fellows. If we conceive of ourselves as members of that body, of which Christ is the head, we will then be careful, *That there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care one for another: And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it,* 1 Cor. xii. 25, 26. If our glorious head be afflicted in all the afflictions of his people, Isa. lxiii. 9. If he is persecuted by their

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sufferings, Acts ix. 4. then such as are united to him, and are members of his body, will in like manner sympathize with their fellow saints, they will feel each others pains, will mourn in each others calamities, will bear one anothers burdens, and do all in their power for relieving them, like the great apostle 2 Cor. xi. 29. *Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is offended, and I burn not?*

4. This sympathy will engage us, cheerfully to communicate all we can afford to the necessities of our brethren, by supplying their wants, as far as their condition, and our circumstances may allow, *Having our gift ready, as a matter of bounty, not covetousness* ----- *giving not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver, 2 Cor. ix. 5, 7.* If the love of our neighbour should engage to this, the love of Christ should constrain to it, since he counts our kindness to his poor members, as done to himself. See Matth. xxv. 34-40.

5. The same motives ought to engage us to consider the interests of our friends in all things as our own and therefore to take every opportunity of serving assisting, and obliging them. Are any of our brethren under malicious calumny and reproach? we must do all in our power to vindicate their reputation, to wipe off all aspersions from their character, and to set it in a true light. Are they injured? we must exert ourselves in pleading their cause, and in maintaining their right. Are they exposed to any danger? we must, with resolution, endeavour to protect them by our assistance and advice: in a word, if in any want we can be useful to them, we ought to consider they are our brethren, and should therefore labour for their interests; *To do good, and to communicate forget not for with such sacrifices God is well pleased, Heb. xiii. 16.*

6. While we endeavour to maintain and exercise an unfeigned love for our brethren, we must, at the same

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same time, beware that we indulge nothing in our own temper or conduct, which may lessen their esteem of us, or their affection for us. It is one of the greatest infirmities of human nature, that we are blind to our own imperfections and faults: we readily perceive the mote in our neighbour's eye, while we observe not the beam in our own: we have many excuses for our own faults, while we make no allowances for the failings of others, we often indulge ourselves in these very things which we censure in others, and take a liberty to ourselves which we wont grant them; but if we are serious in our profession of friendship, we will be earnest in desiring, and careful in adverting to the censure of our Christian intimates: with care and frequency we will examine and censure our own conduct, as if not ours, but another's; and by such judgment we will correct and improve our conversation, even the most minute circumstances: *Let us not therefore judge one another any more, but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block, or an occasion to fall in his neighbour's way, Rom. xiv. 3.* Nor must we think it enough that we abstain from things criminal, that our brother be not offended: the scripture intimates an obligation to forbear even things innocent and allowable, when they come to be of such a kind, as wound the conscience of our brethren, 1 Cor. viii. 9, 11, 12, 13. *But take heed lest this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to them that are weak-----and through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died. But when you sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore if meat make my brother to offend. I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.* It is thus we are to condescend to men of low estate; thus we must bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.

7. Lastly, Reciprocal love and good offices will lead us to a fondness for each other's company; and
this

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this, not only in our formal meetings, but on every opportunity which casts up. I have often observed with pleasure, members of society meetings in the place where I live, seeking each other out, and forming companies on the road, in returning from sermons, or other public assemblies; and while they communed together of divine things, and with an affectionate freedom opened their hearts to each other, I could not but say, see how they love one another,----The companions who love, and are beloved by us, are the people in whose company we find the greatest relaxation of Spirit, and the most rational and solid pleasure: while their opinions have the most influence, their counsel and example have the greatest weight with us; and thus intimacies founded on love, gain strength by frequent correspondence; and by this also, more effectually obtain the noble purposes of friendship. To conclude this head.

If members of religious societies were thus disposed, and thus exercised, this would qualify them more and more for acting a proper part in their religious meetings; and their exercise in these would greatly fortify the amiable dispositions I have recommended.-----By this method, the disastrous evils, which break the peace of society, and disappoint its noble purposes, will be prevented. Esteem, affection, benevolence, gratitude, and the whole lovely train of social virtues, will daily grow; the blessed purposes of society will be obtained, and our meetings will indeed become feasts of charity.

As with a private Christian, it is not enough that he act such a part, as he can answer for to his own mind, but he also makes it his care to be without rebuke in the world, and, as far as is consistent with a good conscience, to obtain their esteem and approbation; so ought it to be with a religious society. While they are at pains, by the rules of their fraternity, to approve themselves to each other; they must also endeavour, by all means, to prevent the censures the world

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world readily make on every thing which differs from their way, or seems to condemn their practices; and must act in such a way towards them that are without, as may force from them that testimony which is due to the way of religion. I therefore proceed to the last thing I proposed, *viz.*

IV. To offer some advices to the members of religious societies, relating to their conduct toward those who are without; who either have no profession of religion, or who do not join in such religious fellowship as this we speak of.

The eyes of the world are, no doubt on every one who has a profession of religion; and, in a particular manner, on persons who are professedly associated on religious views: with a criminal partiality they observe their overt practices; they pry into their secret conduct, and seek every way to find occasion for censure: every miscarriage they discover, gives them a malicious joy; they preposterously fancy, that the faults of a religious person authorizes their crimes; and often come to conclude, that religion is but a name, and that a profession of it is but a mask. A Christian therefore and a member of a religious fraternity, must in all his conduct have this great purpose in view, *viz.* To maintain the credit and dignity of religion; to evidence the sincerity of his own profession; and to set Christianity in that amiable light by his example, as may recommend it to all around him, and may engage the world at once to receive, and love the ways of God. And for these ends,

I. Members of religious societies, ought to beware of despising and undervaluing those they think strangers to religion, and of treating them in a haughty and supercilious manner: though indeed the being a Christian exalts the lowest man to superior dignity; yet such dignity is quite inconsistent with a Pharisaical pride, and will never warrant us to treat those with contempt, who seem strangers to Christianity. Such a conduct makes the world look on religion as a stiff and

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and unfociable principle; makes them conceive a hatred and aversion to the professors, yea to the profession of Christianity itself; and whets their malice to discover, and expose whatever they can find amiss in the lives of religious people. On the contrary, an easy condescending, affable, and obliging conduct, recommends religion, disarms malice itself, and forces even a wicked person to esteem, love, and revere a good man. Such a conduct should therefore be habitual to a Christian, and ever exercised towards all persons: even while we testify a dislike to the practices or shun the society of the profane, it still must be done with goodnature, goodmanners, and discretion. In like manner,

2. A member of a religious fraternity, ought to be ware of rash, passionate, or public censures on the characters of others however notour their faults may be. I have already shown, that censures on the practices of persons, not members of the society, is quite improper for religious meetings*. It is still more improper for any particular member to act such a part: and it is to all purposes unreasonable, if done in a passionate or in a public manner; such a way looks like an assuming a superiority over those we reprove, or intimates a disregard and aversion to them; and must therefore be carefully shunned, if we would either gain them to religion, or maintain our character with them. Though we are still bound to censure vice wherever we find it, yet we must always take care that our reproof be given in a proper season, and in the most modest and engaging way our prudence can direct. And therefore,

3. We ought, by all acts of good will and kindness, to convince those, that, however we dislike their ways, we love their persons; we must take every opportunity of doing good to them; and even when they express the utmost enmity against us, we must demonstrate our readiness to forgive and to do good, even to

* *Vide* Rule xii. Page 74, 75, &c.

our most inveterate enemies. As an evidence of this temper,

4. We must, with all diligence, endeavour to bring those that are strangers, to know and relish the things that pertain to godliness: for this purpose, our prayers, our example, and all the influence we can have with them must be exercised; and this we are to make our purpose in all our conversation with them. A judicious and lively Christian will take the hint from almost every circumstance, to turn the conversation from vain or criminal subjects, to those that are sacred and important: and if to this art, we could add the skill of handling these subjects in a worthy, yet entertaining way, what a blessing would a religious person be, to every company he enters? It is this the apostle exhorts to, Col iv. 5, 6. *Walk in wisdom towards them that are without, redeeming the time. Let your speech be always with grace seasoned with salt, &c.*

5. Lastly, Members of society meetings must endeavour in all things, to act such a part as will bear the most censorious scrutiny their enemies can make. Though we should speak with the tongues of men and angels, yet if our practice belies what our lips utter, we are but as sounding brass, and a tinkling cymbal; and the more flaming our profession be, the more proper objects are we of ridicule and contempt. We must therefore, to an active diligence in all the duties of devotion, add a zealous activity in all the duties we are bound to by our relations, callings, and stations whatever. While we endeavour to keep a close watch over our hearts and practice, that we sin not against God, we must also take all possible care, that we entertain no sentiment, that we indulge no passion, that we utter no expression, and that we allow ourselves in no action, which may injure any man in his character, person, or estate: nor must we think, that the most flagrant crimes will warrant us to transgress this rule, or to neglect the duties we otherwise owe to the wicked person; we must still distinguish betwixt the person

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and his crime: while we hate the last, we must still love the first, and shew that we love him, by mourning for his wickedness, pitying him, praying to God for him, and taking every measure prudence can direct, in order to reclaim and recover him.

It is by such a conduct as this, that Christians will force the approbation of the world in spite of envy: by such a practice the hater of religion will be obliged to own the beauty that is in godliness: and if he is not brought to imitate, at least he will esteem and revere a good man. Though sometimes the ways of God are attacked in the person of a Christian, though such may for a while suffer reproach, yet their real character will at last display itself in its genuine excellency, it will appear the brighter that it has been tried, and thereby have a more affecting influence on those who observe it, perhaps on those very persons who traduced them. The sun itself is sometimes eclipsed, or wades through a cloud, which, as it were, tarnishes its lustre; but when at last he breaks out, his beauty appears more remarkably, and his brightness more dazzling: even so, *The path of the just is as the shining light, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day*, Prov. iv. 18.

— *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven*, Mat. v. 16. — *See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil*, Eph. v. 16. *Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord*.

Thus, as I proposed, I have offered some regulations for preventing the evils complained of, and for the more effectual obtaining the purposes of religious intimacies: but, before I have done, I must observe. That though every body owns, that vicious companions are the most dangerous evils, and that our only safety from such, is by keeping at a distance; yet it is one of the most difficult matters, to prevail with many kind to relinquish the society of persons whose principles

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ples and practices are so agreeable to depraved appetites and passion; and it is equally difficult to persuade them to take up with companions whose thoughts are employed on things beyond the world, whose affections are engaged to things above it, and whose practices are in most instances different, and in many things opposite to the received maxims and ways of it. I shall therefore make the following reflections, as so many inferences from what I have said.

1. That religious intimacies are the best preservatives against the infectious evils which arise from our communication with persons of vicious principles and immoral practices. Such is the inclination mankind have to society, that the most of people think any company is better than none; hence they readily enter into such correspondence with those that are nearest, as soon grows up to familiarity. — Their opinions steal in upon their minds. — If bad principles have imposed on their companions, by means of that false gloss with which prejudice dresseth them, they will be communicated with the same disguise, and for the same reasons will be readily believed and adopted by those that hear them. If therefore a person be not solidly established in the principles of truth and virtue, but takes up his companions at random, what an extreme hazard does he run of being debauched both in principles and morals? And how necessary is it, that every one should be at the utmost pains to enter into intimacies with those only whose conversation and example may establish him in worthy sentiments, and form him to excellency of manners? For,

2. Religious fellowship appears to be attended with all the advantages which a reasonable man can propose to himself by any kind of intimacies. Does one want information or improvement in knowledge, he will find religious intimates have a noble influence to furnish and impress the mind with such sentiments, divine and moral, as form the soul to true devotion, real holiness and excellency. Do we want a true friend, who may take

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part in all our concerns, encourage us in things that are worthy, and be so singularly kind, as to tell us of our faults, and advise us how to correct them, we will find the very constitution of a religious fraternity gives us the prospect of a number of such intimates: or do we incline to that easy relaxation of mind, that innocent cheerfulness and joy which we always expect from our intimates, we may confidently hope for this with friends who have the best reason and the best right to exercise it*.

3. It is plain that these advantages are mutual; the benefits arising from religious fellowship is such as every member has the same access to, and may enjoy in the same measure: while one is edified, his companions are instructed; while he is revived, they are refreshed; and private improvements hereby become diffusively useful: especially considering,

4. That one society of religious intimates, duly formed, and properly exercised, may have a blessed influence on all around them; and this not only by their prayers, but also by their examples. Example is one of these things which equally influence mankind to good or bad, to virtue or to vice: But we may, in charity to human nature, hope that its influence to reform, should be yet stronger than to seduce: there is something in the character of a real Christian, so lovely, so desirable, that even persons who will not imitate, are yet obliged to revere and approve of him. If such be the influence of his example with people in whom the habits of vice are confirmed, and who are grown up in wickedness, what greater, what happier effects may such an example have, where the mind is yet capable of reformation? What still greater influence, where reason acts its part, and directs people to seek for happiness in the way of Christian excellency? And if example be of so much consequence, what benefits may well disposed persons expect from the prayers, the advice and friendship of a devout society?

On the whole, it appears that religious fellowship is one

* See page 44, 45, &c.

one of the most proper and effectual methods for improving that turn our minds naturally have to society; and that such societies, duly regulated, and attended to will have a most happy tendency for procuring both a personal and public reformation.

Among the blessed effects following that singular concern which has appeared in this country for a considerable while past, this was one, that the people crowded together into societies for prayer and spiritual conferences. With joy we heard of fellowship meetings erected in places and among people where Satan had long triumphed: yet serious Christians were apprehensive lest such meetings, for want of experience, and of proper regulations, should miss of their aim, and even fatally miscarry: the poor people themselves were under the same fears, and applied to all they thought able to advise them. It was long expected, that some ministers of the longest standing and experience would publish somewhat for their direction in such a critical juncture. The meetings in the place where I reside applied to me, to draw up some regulations for them; I did so, and was afterwards importuned to publish them, with some dissertation on the nature and reasonableness of such engagements. This I have essayed to do, in such a way, as may be of use to direct in our conduct as members of society in general, and in every social engagement, though more particularly in societies for religious fellowship. Nothing, as far as I know, has ever been published on the subject, except some general rules, which (as I already observed) are readily dispensed with. It is thus I have been induced to offer the above reflections and advices to the public. What may be wrong or wanting, I hope will be excused, in regard of the subject's being new. If this can but offer hints to some abler hand, I shall think my pains well employed: if it engage any number to religious fellowship, or prove useful to them in that exercise, my wish is obtained. May God grant that it may answer these purposes. Amen.

APPENDIX

A P P E N D I X.

I PROMISED, p. 78. That, by way of appendix, I would here add a specimen of the noble subjects of conversation, which the scripture suggest as a help to societies when but forming, or where the members cannot afford themselves variety. And I here subjoin them.

1.---It is said, Acts ii. 13. "When they heard this they were pricked in their hearts," &c. Q. When may the heart be said to be savingly convinced of sin?

2.---John xvi. 8. "When the Comforter is come,--- he will reprove the world of sin," &c. Q. What is the difference betwixt the convictions of natural men, and those of true penitents?

3.---Rom. vii. 13. "That sin, by the commandment might become exceeding sinful," &c. Q. 1. What is it that renders sin so exceeding criminal? Q. 2. How is it by the commandment?

4.---Jer. ii. 19. "Know therefore, and see that it is an evil and a bitter thing, that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God." Q. 1. What is in the nature of sin which renders it an evil and bitter thing? Q. 2. When may a person be said to know the evil and bitterness of it?

5.---Acts xxiv. 25.---"Felix trembled," &c. Q. 1. Whence is it that convictions prove fruitless? Q. 2. How shall we prevent this evil?

6.---Psal. xix. 12. "Who can understand his errors?" Q. How shall we be exercised, in order to discover our secret faults?

7.---2 Cor. vii. 11. "For behold this self same thing that ye sorrowed after a godly sort," &c. Q. 1. What



is that sorrow for sin which is indeed after a godly
fort? Q. 2. How are we to be exercised, in order to
attain it?

8.---Job xxxiv. 32. "What I see not teach thou me."
Q. What is that discovery of sin which a mourning
penitent is to pray for?

9.---1 Theff. v. 19. "Quench not the Spirit." Q.
When may one be said to quench the Spirit?

10.---Luke xiii. 3. "Except ye repent ye shall all
" likewise perish." Q. What is that repentance which
is unto life?

11.---Psal. xcvi. 10. "Ye that love the Lord hate
" evil." Q. What are the evidences of a true hatred
at sin?

12.---Hof. xi. 7. "And my people are bent to back-
" sliding from me." Q. What are the signs of a back-
sliding soul?

13.---Heb. iii. 12. "Take heed, brethren, lest there
" be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in depart-
" ing from the living God." Q. 1. What is that evil
heart of unbelief? Q. 2. How shall we know when
unbelief prevails? Q. 3. How shall we prevent it?

14.---"If I regard sin in my heart, the Lord will
" not hear me." Q. When may one be said to regard
sin in his heart?

15.---Isa. xxviii. 17. "The hail shall sweep away
" the refuge of lies." Q. What are the refuges of lies,
with which so many deceive themselves?

16.---Matth. vii. 26.---"I will liken him to a foolish
" man which built his house upon the sand." Q. Who
are the foolish who build on the sand?

17.---Psal. li. 17. "The sacrifices of God are a bro-
" ken spirit." Q. What is that contrition of soul,
which is so acceptable to God?

18.---Ezek. xxxvi. 26. "A new heart also will I
" give unto you." Q. What are the evidences of a
renewed soul?

19.---John iii. 3. "Except a man be born again he
" cannot

"cannot enter the kingdom of God." Q. On what grounds may one conclude that he is born of God?

20.—Matth. xviii. 3. "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of God." Q. What are these dispositions in which a sincere convert is to resemble a little child?

21.—Eph. ii. 1. "You hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins." Q. What are the signs of spiritual life?

22.—Matth. v. 6. "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." Q. Who are the persons who may be said to hunger and thirst after righteousness?

23.—Psal. ix. 18. "For the needy shall not always be forgotten, the expectation of the poor shall not perish for ever." Q. Who are the poor and needy ones, whom God will not forget?

24.—Gal. i. 15, 16. "But when it pleased God—to reveal his Son in me" Q. When may Christ be said to be revealed in a person's soul?

25.—John i. 14. "We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten Son of God, full of grace and truth." Q. 1. What is that glory which a Christian discovers in the Lord Christ? Q. 2. How shall a soul attain to suitable views of this glory?

26.—Isa. xxvi. 9. "With my soul have I desired thee in the night, and with my spirit within me will I seek thee early." Q. 1. What are these desires after God, which we may conclude to be of divine grace? Q. 2. What is it to seek God with the spirit, and that early? Q. 3. How should a longing soul be exercised in seeking the Lord?

27.—John i. 12. "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God." Q. What is it to receive Jesus Christ in truth and reality?

28.—Isa. lvi. 6.—"And taketh hold of my covenant." Q. What is it to lay hold on God's covenant?

29.—Heb. vi. 18.—"We might have strong consolation,"

"tion, having fled for refuge to lay hold on the hope set before us." Q. Who are they who have truly fled, to Christ for consolation?

30.---Rom. vi. 15. "Yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God." Q. 1. What is it to yield ourselves unto God? Q. 2. When may our members be said to be instruments of righteousness unto God?

31.---Rom. x. 3. "They being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God." Q. 1. Who are these who go about to establish their own righteousness? Q. 2. Who are these who have submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God?

32.---Phil. iii. 3. "For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh." Q. 1. What is it to worship God in the spirit? Q. 2. Who are they that rejoice in Christ Jesus? Q. 3. Who are they who have no confidence in the flesh?

33.---Luke i. 53. "He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he hath sent empty away." Q. 1. Who are the hungry, to whom the promise is made? Q. 2. What is that satisfaction which is promised to them? Q. 3. Who are the rich who are sent empty away?

34.---2 Cor. v. 17. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature." Q. When may one be said to be in Christ Jesus?

35.---Matth. vii. 24. "I will liken him to a wise man, who built his house upon a rock." Q. Who are they who have built on the rock?

36.---Col. ii. 10. "And ye are complete in him." Q. 1. What is it to be complete in Christ? Q. 2. When may we conclude that we are complete in him?

37.---Isa. xii. 2.---"I will trust and not be afraid." Q. 1. What is the ground of a Christian's confidence and

and trust? Q. 2. What is it to trust with confidence and without fear?

38.---Isa. l. 10. "Who is among you that feareth the Lord, and that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God." Q. 1. What is it to fear the Lord? Q. 2. What is it to obey the voice of his servant? Q. 3. What is it to trust in the Lord, and stay upon our God? Q. 4. How shall one attain to a stayed trust in God, when they are walking in darkness.

39.---Mat. v. 20. "except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of God." Q. 1. What is that Pharisaical righteousness which a Christian must exceed? Q. 2. Wherein must our righteousness exceed that of the Pharisees?

40.---Mat. vi. 10. "Thy will be done in earth as in heaven." Q. When may our will be said to be subjected to the will of God?

41.---Mat. v. 47. "If ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Q. Wherein must we exceed the ordinary sort of professors of religion?

42.---Rom. vii. 24. "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Q. Who are the true wrestlers against the body of death or indwelling sin?

43.---Gal. v. 17. "For the flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh." Q. What is the difference betwixt a renewed and an unrenewed man's struggles against sin?

44.---Acts xi. 23. "Exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart, they should cleave unto the Lord." Q. When may one be said to cleave unto the Lord?

45.---Psal. xvi. 8. "I have set the Lord always before me." Q. What is it to set the Lord always before us?

46.---Rom. viii. 6. "To be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace."

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Q. 1. Who are the carnally minded? Q. 2. Who are the spiritually minded?

47.---1 Cor xv. 58. "Be ye stedfast immoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord," &c. Q. 1. What is the stedfastness required of Christians? Q. 2. When may one be said to abound in the work of the Lord? Q. 3. How may we attain to stedfastness and improvement in the ways of God?

48.---John xv. 5. "I am the vine, ye are the branches." Q. What is the satisfying evidence of a vital union with Christ?

49.---Isa. xlv. 22. "Look unto me, and be ye saved." &c. Q. What is that habitual and saving looking to a Saviour which is called for?

50.---Gal. ii. 20. "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life I live in the flesh, is by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." Q. 1. When may one be said to be crucified with Christ? Q. 2. What is it to live by faith on the son of God? Q. 3. How shall we attain to a life of faith in all events and trials? Q. 4. How shall we attain to an assurance of Christ's love to us?

51.---John xvii. 3. "This is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." Q. What are the marks of a saving knowledge of God, and of his son Jesus Christ?

52.---Matth. vii. 16. "Ye shall know them by their fruits." Q. What are the fruits which show one to be indeed a branch of the true vine?

53.---Mat v. 16. "Let your light so shine before men, as others seeing your good works, may glorify your father which is in heaven." Q. When may our light be said to shine before men, to the praise and glory of God?

54.---Rom. vi 17. "But ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered unto you." Q. What is that obedience which is from the heart, and agreeable to the gospel?

55.—Rev. ii. 4. "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." Q.

1. What is the cause of the decay of a Christian's love?

Q. 2. When may our love be said to be decaying?

Q. 3. How may we prevent this great evil?

56.—Jude ver. 21. "Keep yourselves in the love of God." Q. By what means shall we keep ourselves in the love of God?

57.—Eph. iv. 30. "Grieve not the holy Spirit, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption."

Q. 1. What is it to grieve the Holy Spirit? Q. 2. What is the Spirit's sealing work in believers?

58.—Hosea vi. 4. "For your goodness is as the morning cloud, and as the early dew." Q. 1. What occasions the evanishing of our good dispositions? Q. 2. How shall we prevent our losing them?

59.—Rev. iii. 2. "Strengthen the things which remain, and are ready to die." Q. 1. What are the symptoms of grace in decay? Q. 2. What are the causes of this decay? Q. 3. What are the best means for reviving it?

60.—Eph. vi. 13. "And having done all to stand." Q. How shall we be exercised, so as to maintain the dispositions and practice which become Christians?

61.—Psal. xviii. 23. "I kept myself from mine iniquity." Q. 1. How may we discover our predominant sin? Q. 2. How may we conquer it?

62.—2 Pet. iii. 18. "But grow in grace," &c. Q. 1. What are the best means of growing in grace? Q. 2. What are the marks of a growing Christian?

63.—Jude ver. 20. "Building up yourselves in your most holy faith." Q. What are the proper means for our being established in the faith?

64.—1 Pet. ii. 7. "Unto you therefore, which believe, he is precious." Q. What are the things in Jesus, which render him precious to believers?

65.—Rom. viii. 16. "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our Spirit, that we are the children of God." Q. What are the workings of the Spirit by which

which he witnesseth that we are the children of God?

66.-----Job. xi. 13. "If thou prepare thine heart, and stretch out thine hand toward him," &c. Q. 1. What is the preparation of heart, which is requisite in order to our approaching to God? Q. 2. How shall we attain to a due fervour of spirit, in stretching out our hands to him?

67.-----Psal. lxiii. 2. "To see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary," Q. When may we be said to see the power and glory of God in ordinances?

68.-----Psal. lxxxvi. 1. "How amiable are thy tabernacles, Lord God of Hosts!" Q. Whence is it, that a Christian esteems the courts of God so highly?

69.-----Isa. lviii. 13. "If thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight," &c. Q. 1. How are we to prepare for a Sabbath, and the exercises of that holy day? Q. 2. How are we to sanctify it?

70.-----Psal. lxxxiv. 4. "Blessed are they that dwell in thy house," &c. Q. 1. What are the peculiar blessings received in ordinances? Q. 2. How shall we know if we be indeed profited by them?

71.-----Job xxiii. 3. "O that I knew where I might find him!" &c. Q. What part shall one act, who has been long seeking God, but cannot find him in duties, ordinances, or providences?

72.-----Job xxiii. 4. "I would fill my mouth with arguments," Q. What are the most proper arguments in wrestling with God?

73.-----James i. 6. "Let him ask in faith, nothing wavering," Q. 1. What is it to pray in faith? Q. 2. How shall we guard against doubting and unbelief in prayer?

74.-----Jude verse 20. "Praying in the Holy Ghost." Q. What is it to pray in the Holy Ghost?

75.-----Rom. viii. 26. "The Spirit also helpeth our infirmities," &c. Q. How doth the Spirit help our infirmities?

76.-----Matth. vi. 6. "But thou when thou prayest, enter into thy closet," Q. How are we to be exercised in secret prayer?

77.-----Deut. xvii. 19. "And he shall read therein all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord."

Q. How

Q. How shall we read the scriptures, so as to reap spiritual advantages?

73.-----Heb. iv. 2. "But the word preached did not profit them, not being received with faith in them that heard it." Q. 1. How shall we prepare for hearing the word? Q. 2. How shall we hear it, so as to profit by it? Q. 3. What is it to mix faith with the hearing of the word?

79.-----2 Chron. xxx. 19. Every one that prepareth his heart to seek the Lord God of his Fathers." Q. What is the preparation of heart requisite for solemn ordinances?

80.-----2 Cor. xi. 24. "This do in remembrance of me." Q. 1. What are the things relating to Christ, which we are particularly to remember in communicating? Q. 2. With what dispositions of mind are we to remember him? Q. 3. How are we to be exercised in order to this remembrance?

81.-----Heb. xi. 28. "Through faith he kept the passover." Q. How is faith to be exercised in communicating?

82.-----Psal. iv. 4. "Commune with your own hearts upon your bed." Q. 1. What are the most proper subjects for a Christians meditation? Q. 2. How shall we bring our hearts to spiritual meditation?

83.-----2 Cor. xiii. 5. "Examine yourselves, whether you be in the faith?" Q. 1. What are the things about which we ought to examine ourselves? Q. 2. How, and when should we be thus exercised?

84.-----Jer. xvii. 9. "The heart is deceitful above all things," &c. Q. 1. When may we conclude of our impressions, that they have been, or are delusive? Q. 2. What are the proper marks of delusion in our affections or exercises? Q. 3. How shall we be exercised, when we discover the imposture?

85.-----1 Pet. v. 5. "Be clothed with humility." Q. What is it to be clothed with humility?

86.-----2 Cor. xii. 7. "Lest I should be exalted above measure," &c. Q. 1. How shall we perceive the growth of spiritual pride in us? Q. 2. How shall we prevent it?

87.-----Psal. xxx. 6. "In my prosperity I said: I shall never be moved." Q. How shall we prevent falling into security, after signal favours from God?

88.-----Prov

- 88.—Prov. iii. 24. "Keep thy heart with all diligence."
 Q. How are we to be exercised, in order to keep our hearts?
 89.—Psal. cxli. 3. "Set a watch, O Lord, before my
 "mouth." Q. What is the most effectual method for ob-
 taining the government of the tongue?
 90.—Phil. i. 27. "only let your conversation be as be-
 cometh the gospel." Q. When is our conversation as becom-
 eth the gospel?
 91.—Gal. vi. 9. "And let us not weary in well doing."
 Q. How may we prevent our wearying in duty?
 92.—1 John ii. 15. "If any man love the world, the
 "love of the Father is not in him." Q. What is the love
 of the world, which is inconsistent with the love of God?
 93.—1 John iii. 14. "We know we have passed from
 "death to life, because we love the brethren." Q. What
 are the marks of a true love to our brethren?
 94.—Mat. v. 44. "Love your enemies," &c. Q. When
 is our love to enemies of the right sort?
 95.—Mat. vi. 14. "If you forgive men their trespasses,
 "your heavenly Father will also forgive you." Q. How
 shall we bring our hearts to a forgiving temper?
 96.—Mat. vii. 3. "And, why beholdest thou the mote
 "that is in thy brother's eye, and considerest not the beam
 "that is in thine own eye?" Q. 1. How shall we over-
 come the prejudices which render us blind to our own faults?
 Q. 2. How shall we attain to such impartiality in self judg-
 ing, as to judge ourselves with the same severity as we do
 others?
 97.—Lev. xix. 17. "Thou shalt in any way rebuke thy
 "neighbour." Q. What is the proper way of admonishing
 our brother?
 98.—Eph. v. 7. "Be ye not partakers of other mens sins?"
 Q. How do we become partakers of other mens sins?
 99.—Heb. xii. 10—"For our profit, that we might be
 "partakers of his holiness." Q. When is affliction truly
 profitable?
 100.—Gal. iv. 16—"Peace be on them." Q. How shall
 we act, so as to maintain peace with God, and in conscience?
 101.—Phil. vi. 24. "Grace be with all them that love
 "our Lord" Q. What is that grace, whereof the lovers
 of Christ do partake?
 102.—Psal. lxxxv. 8. "For he will speak peace to his
 "people."

“people.” Q. How shall we know that peace which God speaks, from that which we speak to ourselves?

103.—Psal. cxix. 19. “I am a stranger in the earth.”

Q. What is the character of one who lives as a stranger in the earth?

104.—1 Cor. x. 31.—“Do all to the glory of God.”

Q. How shall we direct our natural and civil actions to the glory of God?

105.—Rom. x. 1. “My hearts desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved.” Q. What means are we to use for the conversion of others?

106.—Rev. iii. 3. “I Will come on thee as a thief.” Q. 1. What frame of spirit ought we to maintain in the view of Christ’s coming? Q. 2. Whence comes it to be such a difficult matter to maintain this frame? Q. 3. What is that watchfulness we are to exercise in the view of his coming?

107.—Phil. i. 21. “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” Q. 1. When may we be said to live to Christ? Q. 2. When may we conclude that our death shall be gain.

108.—Mat. xxiv. 44. “Therefore be ye also ready.” &c. Q. When may one be said to be ready for death and judgment?

109.—2 Pet. iii. 12. “Looking for and hasting to the coming of the day of God.” Q. 1. How shall we look for the coming of the day of God? Q. 2. How shall we attain to a joyful prospect of this event?

By what I have said, it is easy to see, that there is no end to the noble subjects of conversation of which the scriptures suggest; for these are indeed an inexhaustible fund: Nor should I have condescended on such a great number but for the reason already given. *viz.* To assist weaker Christians who could not afford themselves any variety for conversation.

I must add, that tho’ the far greatest part of the above texts and questions were collected before I had seen the Rev. Mr. Willison’s letter to a private society in Edinburgh; yet where the questions coincide, I have in the most of instances, chosen the texts which he condescends on, and the questions also, with little variation.

